MS-4850: Daniel Jeremy Silver Papers, 1972-1993.
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Come On In, the Water's Fine, unpublished manuscript, first draft, chapters 7-15, pages 142-284, undated.

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Chapter 7

JUDAISM IS

It was a bright morning. Everything and everyone was fresh. I began with a bit of personal history. Twenty-five years ago my father wrote a book distinguishing the Jewish world outlook from that of other philosophies and religions and titled his manuscript Where Judaism Differs. An editor put the title into the past tense, Where Judaism Differed, and so it was published. The editor apparently was motivated by a point of view shared at the time by many of liberal spirit that the historic theological differences between the major religions were no longer significant. He believed that no one paid serious attention to doctrine, that only the ethical teachings of the religions counted and that these were fundamentally similar; moreover, since doctrinal distinctions bred distance and misunderstanding, it was a progressive act to deny their continued importance.

Dad's editor misread the times. Doctrine isn't dead. Indeed, a tidal wave of religious passion has rolled across the globe. College women in Iran have thanked the Ayotollah Khomeini for ordering them back into purdah. Across the Near East immams preach jihad, holy war, against Israel. In Ireland, Lebanon, Iran, and India hundreds die because of doctrinal differences. Nor have religious passions been limited to backward ccuntries or ignorant folk. The Right-To-Life crusade is fueled by church doctrine and led by many who are well-educated. Nor has the house of Israel been exempt. Some of the settlements on the West Bank serve security purposes. Others are there

because groups like the Gush Emunim, the self-styled 'faithful', insist that a Biblical description of the boundaries of the Promised Land must determine the foreign policy objectives of the government.

The editor reflected a particular time and situation. The Allies had won the war. America was prosperous and powerful. We seemed to be solving our problems and, among many intellectuals, there was a tendency to see religion as a set of medieval doctrines floating somewhere out there, interesting but archaic. People reminded each other that Confucius, Jesus, and Hillel each had taught the Golden Rule and could see no good reason to get excited about quaint customs or parochial formulations. Ministers and rabbis acted more like social workers and counselors than celebrants of a mystery or teachers of truth.

The traditional claims of the various religions had been discredited. Cultural anthropologists had located religion in every known culture, in the process making it clear that all claims to a monopoly on truth or to sole possession of the keys of the Kingdom were disputed and contestable. The promise of Heaven had been identified by socialist theory with propaganda designed to encourage political passivity. Biblical miracles were mocked as credulity. To use a favorite word of the day, religion was no longer relevant.

My father's editor, whom I later got to know, was, in fact, a communicant of an American civic religion which assumes the unquestioned value of democracy, social reform, and individual freedom, and bases its vision in the faith - I use the word deliberately - that what is contradictory, erratic, or malicious in human action results from societally induced distortions of our innate decency rather than any

inherent limitation of human nature. He shared with many other fine and gentle people the disadvantage of being an educated, mildly liberal, middle-class white American male who, secure in his country's power and prosperity, felt confident that his values were right and that ultimately they would be accepted by the rest of the world. There were still witch doctors and faith healers but they belonged to the Third World and the other America and would disappear as the benefits of learning and prosperity spread.

- What's your problem with these ideas? They seem reasonable. I believe that millions have been brutalized by dehumanizing institutions and that, as the world's institutions are reformed, our nicer side will emerge.

The cold streets of an urban slum, poverty and parentless homes certainly deprive millions of useful supports, not to speak of love and valuable role models. The jungle brings out the feral in the human animal. But environment isn't everything. A person of courage and principle can stand against the tide: "In a place where there are no men, strive to be a man." The Torah makes this point in the famous myth of Sodom and Gemorrah, the wicked cities of the Plain. God decided to destroy these towns for their evil ways, but Abraham intercedes on behalf of any good folk who might live there: "Will you sweep away the innocent with the guilty?" When the count was taken, not even twenty righteous citizens were to be found, but the point had been made that even in Sodom strong-minded and highly moral individuals could survive.

- I read recently that Sodom and Gomorrah had been located by archeologists. Why did you call this story a myth?

Researchers have been excavating sites on the southeast bank of the Dead Sea where the Cities of the Plain are presumed to have been situated, but as yet any identification is only conjecture. No inscription has been found identifying any site. Even if we could positively locate these cities, the Genesis story would still be a myth, a story whose truth lies below the surface. Oral histories told of the sudden destruction of these cities and this famous event provided the appropriate focus for the God-Abraham dialogue which is the heart of the myth and makes the important point that God is just and not vengeful, reasonable, not a tyrant, a quite different god from any the pagan world had.

- Go back to your editor and his ideas that religious differences had been important, but weren't any longer. Where did he make his mistake?

Where Judaism Differed was published in 1956 just before ethnic and black studies burst on the scene. Blacks, it seemed, wanted to be black, not white. Spanish parents wanted their children taught in their native tongue. Christians wanted to be evangelical, not simply ethical. Disturbed by the blind impersonality of the mass society - T. S. Eliot's line caught its spirit: "here are decent godless people, their only memory the asphalt road and a thousand lost golf balls" - many subsequently turned away from the cosmopolitan ideal, 'no artificial divisions', which had characterized earlier progressive thought, and recognized the importance of the special and surprising messages.

Everywhere there was a renewed interest in 'soul'. Some turned to the cults, but far more to the religious gospels which had provided their ancestors with identity, moral certainty, and collective pride. It was the age of born-again evangelism and Jesus Christ Superstar. It was a time for "Tradition, Tradition".

Moreover, he projected his hopes and some rather innocent ideas about ecumenicism onto four billion earthlings and as a reasonable man he failed to understand that religions are not judged in terms of logical consistency and up-to-dateness but in terms of their emotional effectiveness. His life was calm and he forgot that most of the world was in turmoil. In times of anxiety, we want our families near us; we pull our religion close and hang on desperately to our religion's special message. What else is there?

Elie Wiesel introduced his powerful novel of the Holocaust years, The Gates of the Forest, with a Hassidic story Dad's editor might have sundered. "When the great Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov saw misfortune threatening the Jews, it was his custom to go to a certain part of the forest to meditate. There he would light a fire, say a special prayer, and the miracle would be accomplished and the misfortune averted. Later, when his disciple, the celebrated Magid of Mezritch, had occasion, for the same reason, to intercede with Heaven, he would go to the same place in the forest and say: 'Master of the Universe, listen! I do not know how to light the fire, but I am still able to say the prayer!' And again the miracle would be accomplished. Still later, Rabbi Moshe Leib of Sasov, in order to save his people once more, would go into the forest and say: 'I do not know how to light the fire,

I do not know the prayer, but I know the place and this must be sufficient.' It was sufficient and the miracle was accomplished. Then it fell to Rabbi Israel of Rizhyn to overcome misfortune. Sitting in his armchair, his head in his hands, he spoke to God: 'I am unable to light the fire and I do not know the prayer; I cannot even find the place in the forest. All I can do is tell the story, and this must be sufficient.' And it was sufficient."

- You're saying he misunderstood the urgency of our need for reassurance.

And the fundamental and elemental role of religion. Wiesel ends this parable with the line: "God made man because he loves stories." A religion's special message is redemptive, and to blur the specialness is to create intolerable doubts about its promise.

- In that sense this return to religion is a sad thing. Religions do create divisions. I lost a good friend who suddenly got all hot about his Christianity and couldn't leave me alone. He insisted I had to be saved.

There's no way out. My editor went to school when sociologists were describing American society as a melting pot; but cultural pluralism won the day. We resist being boiled down into a bland stew. We need identity and community; and community implies distances from others as well as closeness to your own.

George Santayana is credited with the observation that to try to be religious without espousing a specific religion is like trying to speak without controlling a specific language. Religions perform common social and psychological functions, but identity of function is

simply that and no more. Catholicism, Shamanism, Shintoism, and the Torah tradition are distinct religions each shaped by its special vision. The believer senses both the community of belief and a certain separation from those of other beliefs. America's civil religion and Soviet Communism are diametrically opposed in teaching and messianic hope, and their fierce competition for people's loyalty is almost inevitable.

- If I accept your all-inclusive definition of religion, I can appreciate what you're saying. But limit yourself to the conventional religions. Aren't Judaism and Christianity built around similar values? People speak of a Judeo-Christian tradition. We share the Bible.

There are similarities but far more differences. What is Torah to Judaism is Old Testament to Christianity, and what is taught in the New Testament determines how the church approaches the old. The church believes that the Old Testament contains important, even inspired, materials, a chronicle of the first stage of sacred history, prophecies about the Christ-Messiah, and some moving psalms; but that much of it has been cancelled or superseded, particularly the Torah law, the part Jews declare to be the heart of God's special and surprising message.

- We share the Ten Commandments.

The concept more than its specifics. Jews read, "you shall not murder." Most Christian translations read, "you shall not kill;" their version fits more closely Jesus' 'turn the other cheek' sermon than the clear intent of the Torah tradition which specifically permits wars of self-defense and stipulates capital punishment for certain crimes. Paul,

and subsequently all of Christianity, denied the authority of Torah law over their lives. Torah laws were treated as the no longer binding rules of the Jews. The Ten Commandments were treated as the synthesis of the laws necessary for society to function. As Dr. Einstein has taught us, perspective determines what we see.

- Aren't you making much out of a minor difference of translation?

I think not. You shall not kill suggests both pacifism and vegetarianism, interesting special messages, but not themes which have been central to the Torah tradition.

- We share the hope of peace on earth.

But we express it differently. The Christian vision is of a world joined in the mystic body of Christ. The Jewish vision emphasizes Jews secure in Zion and the world enjoying justice and peace. Little is said of everyone being joined in one religious communion.

- Such differences are limited to official pronouncements. People don't care.

Perhaps not, but differences in a religion inevitably have an impact on private attitudes. Try a simple test. Ask a few friends whether or not they agree with the sentence: Faith is a private matter. I think you will find that most Christians will say 'yes' without a second thought; and most Jews will agree, but quickly add something about the importance of community. The rabbis described the Jewish people as an extended family: "all Israel are related." Jews everywhere support Israel, welcome Soviet emigres, and worry about co-religionists in South Africa and the Argentine. Jewish communities

in every town of size in the United States organize fund-raising drives for caring institutions, religious education, and the relief of needy Jews under the rubric, 'we are one'. Such support is instinctive among Jews who have been taught by the prophets as well as by harsh experience that being a Jew involves you with God and with the Jewish people.

- People of all religions cooperate in civil affairs.

On some issues. Elements of the Protestant Church argue that the public school day should begin with prayer, a position most in the Jewish community oppose. The Roman Catholic bishop of Cleveland and I worked closely on race-related matters, particularly desegregation of the public schools, but we are on opposite sides of the political fence when it comes to Federal aid to parochial schools. I support the Planned Parenthood Association, and I am sure he does not. The specialness of our religion's message leads us to adopt different agendas and to take different stands on a variety of specific social problems.

The Jewish tradition emerged in a cultural environment where the body and the soul were accepted as inseparably intertwined. The Biblical word, nefesh, denotes the heart and that sense of individuality we call soul. Christianity emerged later in a world deeply influenced by Greek categories of thought whose tendency was to separate matter and form, body from soul. Form, the soul, was seen as eternal, pure; matter, the flesh, as perishable and impure. Formed by men who thought naturally in this dualistic way, early Christianity set high value on those religious disciplines which would free the soul from its prison within the body. To that end it encouraged ascetic disciplines

such as fasting and the mortification of the flesh. Marriage could only be seen as a concession to the flesh.

- Many of the differences seem to deal with sex.

Christianity praised celibacy. Judaism labeled marriage kiddushim, a sanctification, talked of love as a natural and healthy human expression, and saw no reason to be ashamed of physical attraction. "Three sights are too wonderful for me, four which I know not: the way of an eagle in the air; the way of a serpent upon a rock; the way of a ship in the midst of the sea; and the way of a man with a young woman." Rabbis always have married. According to folklore, God spends part of each day as a marriage broker and enjoys His work. A thirteenth-century sage-mystic, Nachmanides, wrote a book which praised the sexual relationships between men and women as fulfilling God's creative purpose, not only because sex produced children but because pleasure was given and received.

- But I. B. Singer's novels describe Jews who rolled in the snow, fasted for extended periods of time and practiced various forms of denial.

Jewish history is a long record, and you can locate in it men who bathed in cold rivers and who fasted to break free from the power of their appetites. But the Torah's unitary understanding of human personality operated as a caution not to divide man into parts and declare some parts seemly and others unseemly. The community appreciated the piety of those of ascetic temperament but did not declare their way superior to those who worshipped God with a whole heart and after a good meal.

- It's all interesting, but wasn't that editor saying: what was, was; but little of all this matters any more?

We're humans all, and all of us have taken some of our values from the civil religion, but never underestimate the power of conditioning, environment and tradition. Even where the fires of belief burn low, the spirit glows with your religion's special cast. The philosopher Bertram Russell, makes it clear in his Autobiography that he has lost all belief in Christian doctrine, but I came across this paragraph in which he describes a visit to Greece:

> I found myself in a little church belonging to the days when Greece was part of the Byzantine Empire. To my astonishment, I felt more at home in this little church than I did in the Parthenon or in any of the other Greek buildings of Pagan times. I realized then that the Christian outlook had a firmer hold upon me than I had imagined. The hold was not upon my beliefs, but upon my feelings. It seemed to me that where the Greeks differed from the modern world it was chiefly through the absence of a sense of sin, and I realized with some astonishment that I, myself, am powerfully affected by this sense in my feelings though not in my beliefs.
>
> I know that the Western Wall in the Old City of Jerusalem is essentially a retaining wall built by the tyrant Herod when he decided to enlarge The Temple's plaza. I dislike the aspect of a religious circus which I have sometimes found there. Yet, every time I go, I am moved. I see, not the stores, but the generations of pious men and women who braved taunts and attack to pray here for the coming of the Messiah, and I am moved by the indomitability of the human spirit.

- I can see the impact of American culture but not that of the Torah tradition.

It's interesting that we work best together on political issues and

are most apart in the area of personal morality, particularly on family and sex related issues: birth control, divorce, abortion, homosexuality, etc., where the civil religion has no clear position.

- Given the pervasiveness of the civil religion, wasn't the editor right in believing that the old differences are disappearing?

Torah may have little impact on some Jews; we've agreed a label is only a label; but we've also agreed that the impact of conditioning is significant even when we are unconscious of it. Not all the Jewish activists in the anti-war movements had gone to religious school, but something of the Jewish ethos had gotten through. I remember an early seventies demonstration in front of the Administration Building of the university where I teach. I was skirting the crowd on my way to lecture when I was accosted by a student I knew and berated for holding my class: "You should be here, this is what Judaism is all about." She was wrong. That particular noise was more adolescent rage than prophetic outrage; but she was expressing an instinctive recognition that Amos and Isaiah would not have remained silent in a similar situation.

- But there's less and less Judaism in the environment in each generation and so less Jewish impact.

That's not necessarily so. In many homes there is more observance than in the homes these parents came from. We've already talked about The Jewish Catalogue phenomenon.

- But that's a temporary third generation phenomenon.

No one is sure. For better or worse the more open-minded and liberal religious approaches seem to be losing ground across the world.

We live in an age when ideology is in full cry and where many religions are again demanding submission to church authority. Liberal religious groupings are a minority within their communities and almost unknown outside the Western world; and, even here, it's the fundamentalist and traditional groups that are showing the most growth. If anything, the old differences are being reasserted. Pope John Paul is staunching liberal attitudes towards birth control and divorce in his church. Fundamentalist churches in America are working hard to reinstitute Blue Laws and prayers in public school and the rabbinate in Israel has moved to reject as Jews those converted by non-orthodox rabbis.

- Come back home. You speak of a Torah tradition. Aren't there in effect Torah traditions? My rabbi just had a knock down drag out debate with an orthodox scholar about the ordination of women. Politically and socially these two rabbis seem poles apart.

A river sometimes separates and runs on two sides of an island, but ultimately the flow comes again together. We differ on a whole shopping list of issues, but the sense of a shared past and destiny keeps these differences from being completely decisive. Each of us is trying to adapt Torah to reality as we perceive it. We share veneration for Torah, and we feel part of an historic community.

- But the differences are major. I've read that the Reform movement has organized several gay synagogues. The rabbinic tradition defines homosexuality as a sin. The tradition requires ground burial, but some congregational cemeteries include mausoleums and niches for ashes. How can contradictory positions be equally Jewish?

It's almost always a question of emphasis. Some groups emphasize the letter of the law, others its spirit. Take the issue of homosexuality. The rabbinic tradition quotes a specific Torah rule which condemns homosexual acts; the liberal tradition cites Torah texts which prohibit treating anyone as a misfit or outcast. Where we come down will depend on whether we give greater weight to a formal rule or a broad moral injunction, our general attitude towards change, and whether our conceptual model for Judaism is the river or the tree. None of these issues are simple matters. I'm a liberal rabbi, but I'm troubled by the idea of a gay synagogue. I believe a congregation should include all elements in a community. I'm afraid a single focus synagogue will mistake its special concern for the wide range of issues Torah represents.

Rabbinic halacha permits abortion only when there is a direct threat to the mother's life. Since I define life qualitatively, I have no problem with abortions authorized when the woman feels emotionally or physically threatened. Both approaches affirm the sanctity of life. We differ in the degree to which we will adjust Jewish norms to the realities of modern life. There are differences, and they are basic; but, as long as they grow out of serious concern with Torah, they qualify as Jewish and can claim to be within the tradition.

Actually, in many ways, our pluralistic community gains from our disagreements. Debate sharpens awareness and the existence of various communities creates options. The more flexible among us force the formalists to consider whether circumstances have changed so much that people are being hurt rather than helped by ancient restrictions, and the

formalities force those of liberal spirit to examine their positions carefully to make sure that they are arguing genuine Torah concerns and not simply their convenience. I have noticed this benefit during the abortion debate. Liberals no longer dismiss out of hand criticisms of abortion as a birth control technique and formalists have begun to seek ways to adjust their reservations to take account of the new diagnostic capacities of modern medicine.

- A point of interest: Why did the rabbinic tradition limit abortions so sharply?

The relevant halachic rules were first formulated in Greco-Roman times when surgery was primitive, dangerous, and resorted to only near delivery, and only when the dangers to the mother's life were apparent and a simple excision of the foetus was passible. The rabbis faced a different set of circumstances sociologically as well as medically. Their world was underpopulated and fertility was a constant problem. Their issue was which life: the mother's or the baby's. Today abortion is a safe surgical procedure best carried out during the first trimester of pregnancy; our world is overpopulated and the human species does not have to be encouraged "to be fruitful and multiply." Our issue is whether to deliver a malformed or unwanted baby.

We all know that anti-semitism doesn't ask a Jew's denomination. Arguments are in the family. Secularist Jews eat kosher food at community meetings. Non-orthodox in Israel certainly resent having to conform to rabbinic laws of personal status; but all Israeli Jews speak the same language, study the same history and follow the same calendar.

- I understand family arguments (laughter).

- When I was in Israel there were pickets in front of a Jerusalem hospital which was performing autopsies. I know that the orthodox won't permit Reform and Conservative rabbis to officiate at weddings or recognize the authenticity of their conversions. What sense does it make to speak of c Torah tradition?

Each sees what he can see. Threatened by a fast-changing world they didn't make and don't comprehend, some Jews have retreated into a defensive shell constructed of the forms of the past. Other Jews have left their past behind for a world constructed out of their hopes for the future; most of us are trying to build our present out of our traditions and our hopes, and it's not easy. In the history of any religion, there are periods of calm and periods of transformations. We're obviously going through some rough water.

- How much weight do you give to the old ways?

A hundred generations of sensitive prescriptions should not be cavalierly dismissed but neither should its forms be slavishly followed. My rule is tc break with the past only when the older forms cause palpable harm or restrict human development by failing to take into consideration the circumstances of modern life. The area of women's rights is perhaps the one where I break most often with the old ways. I do not consider the fact that the pronouns in the Torah text are of masculine gender sufficient reason to deny to a woman the right to initiate divorce proceedings or to offer testimony in court or to be a rabbi.

- A young woman who to this point had sat quietly spoke up with some heat. She allowed that she found my discussion interesting but what had this to do with her and her friends? History is over. Paul,

Augustine, and Nachmanides are long dead. My friends, Christian and Jewish, and I live in a liberated society, take our advice on sex and marriage from professional counselors, and neither know nor care what our respective traditions teach. Indeed, my rabbi tends to equivocate, but when all is said and done he believes the new morality is generally healthy and I seriously doubt that he made his decision on the basis of any Torah texts.

You're right, from your perspective. I've said it before. Most young Jews and Christians go to the same schools, read the same books, play the same sports, watch the same programs on television, think the same way about pre-marital sex and politics, and read the same experts on human development. More Jews read "Dear Abbey" than Nachmanides. Probably the only Torah commandment dealing with sex and marriage which is fully observed is the one which prohibits incest.

- Then isn't all talk about Jewish identity pointless? Samuel may get his presents on Hanukkah and Christopher on Christmas, but both asked for and will receive the same record albums. There's a good chance Christopher doesn't know the Christological base of his name or care and that he will fall in love with Samuel's sister, not only because she is attractive but because they share common interests and "speak the same language." There may be theological and ritual differences, but on the human level where it counts, aren't most young Jews and Christians cut of the same cloth?

I can't be truly human if I lack a compelling vision of life's coherence, a religion, and the Torah tradition is such a vision and one with a remarkably good track record. Where it had once been chic to

disparage the dietary laws as outdated public health measures and mock the tallit and tefillim as peculiar prayer uniforms, in recent years social scientists have studied the psychological and societal function of ritual and reported on the importance of ritual for mental health. Ritual is in. Bar and Bat Mitzvahs, Selihot services, Afruf, have reappeared in congregations where once decorum and a sermon comprised almost the whole liturgy. Guitar evangelism is not unknown in traditional synagogues. The pendulum has swung so far some of us are concerned that the religious life may become a form of idolatry for some who will neglect the parallel emphasis on learning and social justice. Fortunately, one of the grand things about this ancient and rich tradition is that it survives cultural fads because it is so many sided and contains wisdom relevant to all sides of life's contradictions. Ultimately, the forgotten themes are picked up.

- My generation seems to be going two ways at once. We are reviving many of our grandparents' religious ways and discarding many of their moral values. 'Give me that old time religion and the new morality.' I sometimes feel that we're like a young child who drags along his security blanket whenever he leaves his room.

In some contexts, new morality may be simply a euphemism for the old immoralities. Careless sex is simply careless and what is euphemistically called an open marriage anything but a stable relationship. The older forms are not the only ways to be "holy". Kiddushim implies an unshakable concern for the sanctity of human relationships, not a requirement that our homes and marriages duplicate those of our parents. The new morality is not the first new morality in Jewish life. Polygamy

was the accepted way in Biblical times and, in some Sephardic communities, remained the custom until quite recently. The Muslim environment was mildly polygamous, and the Machamim had no trouble seeing Kiddushim, sanctity, in such marriages. It's not the form but the spirit which consecrates.

- How do we judge?

I look to see whether a change attempts to adjust standards of loyalty, responsibility, and honest feeling to a new situation or an arrangement of convenience. Clearly, we must find new ways to support family ties, bind close the ties of love, see to it that each child is a wanted child, and bring dignity to old age. The older family had an authoritarian base. In a world where women have finally emerged as persons, partnership in marriage and concepts of shared parenting are appropriate. With the disappearance of the extended family and the fact that both husband and wife may need or want to work, it may not be possible to care for aged parents in the home.

- Somehow Judaism's stance on these issues seems vague and undefined.

Really not. There is a broad consensus in such areas as the sanctity of family, respect of persons, race relations, the well-cultivated mind, compassion, sensitivity and empathy, peace, man's careful stewardship of God's gift of life and the good earth. The problem is that we no longer see in our homes on a daily basis how these values are worked out. Our problem is a lack of role models, not a lack of rules.

The Torah contains the fixed and the dynamic, both specific commandment and general principle, and a surprising amount of different

opinions. The book of Leviticus mandates a rich and complex sacrificial code; Amos and Isaiah doubted the efficacy of the shrine and of sacrifices. The book of Ruth clearly accepts the normalcy, if not the fitness, of intermarriage; Ezra ordered Jerusalemites who had taken non-Judean wives to put them away. We know that the rabbinic schools of Hillel and Shammai debated several dozen issues over several decades and that there are many differing opinions among traditional scholars even today on such issues as the drafting of women into the Israeli army and organ transplants. The Torah is one, yet everyone who confronts its teachings brings to it his own circumstances, mind, and needs. We come from many backgrounds and, inevitably, have different understandings. Nor is this only a modern sentiment. In several places the Talmud says simply, "both this opinion and the other (quite different) opinion are the words of the living God."

- I'm still puzzled. You're describing a religious tradition which includes strong differences of opinion. That's a hard concept.

I know, but life is full of contradictions, so it has ever been. So it will ever be.

- Given our differences, what makes you think we'll stay together?

- In my experience, there's no more bitter argument than a family feud.

Questions of faith could permanently estrange significant elements of the community of fate. Family life requires compromise and patience, and there are those of 'there is no other way but mine' persuasion. But in Cleveland all the congregations meet to talk of shared concerns; and on the national level there's a Synagogue Council.

- What will hold such a disparate community together?

Principles and pressure. We are a community of faith because we are a community of fate, and a community of fate because the faith remains compelling.

Chapter 8

BUT I DON'T BELIEVE IN GOD

- My problem is that the synagogue is a place for believers and I'm not sure I believe in God. It was Friday morning. Sabbath eve services were scheduled. It was the first time the question of faith in a personal God had come up.

No one signs articles of faith when they join a congregation. Synagogue rolls and services are open to all who care about the Torah tradition and the Jewish people.

- But I feel out of place.

That feeling is in you, not in the synagogue.

Before we begin the Kol Nidre service on Yom Kippur there is a ritual which goes back to the bad days when many Jews were forced to accept baptism as the only alternative to death. Some became martyrs. Others chose to dissimilate. As you can imagine, those who became Christians were not whole-hearted and, on this holiest of days, many yearned to worship in the familiar way; so a formula was introduced which said simply: permission exists even for apostates to join in this service.

The synagogue began as a beit am, a local center where meeting, study and informal worship took place. It was only after the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple by the Romans that the synagogue took on some of the aspects of a sanctuary. The community needed a religious center and rites like the blowing of the shofar and the blessing of the lulav and ethrog, once limited to The Temple, were

transferred to the synagogue whose "holiness" was thereby enhanced. Yet, the syncgogue never gave up entirely its original popular and informal character. In the Temple fences kept all but the priests at a distance from the inner courts. The synagogue has no fences or Keep Out signs: "Let all who are thirsty come and drink."

- You're talking architecture and I'm talking about belief.

Caught up as we all are in an age of uncertainty, synagogue membership reflects our heterogeneity and respects our doubts, but tries to take us beyond them.

Every worship service includes the Shema, a public affirmation of God's existence, oneness and accessibility; and petitional prayers addressed to the God who knows our thoughts before we utter them. Still, no one is denied entrance if they have doubts or escorted out if they cannot affirm.

- Why would a non-believer come? Prayer can have no meaning for him.

Many who are agnostic are nevertheless deeply involved with aspects of Jewish culture or are deeply committed to the survival of the Jewish people, and the synagogue is a place where they can touch base.

- But I feel a hypocrite at services.

A hypocrite puts on a false face and plays a role designed to delude. When you enter no one stands to gain except yourself. There are no points to be made. We come in search, if we do not come in faith; and there is nothing hypocritical in admitting that simple fact.

- How can any modern believe in God?

I do. Life is not a chance chemical explosion or a hapless, hopeless passage from cradle to crypt; purpose and promise are implicit in creation. God is the Guarantor that it all has meaning and the Redeemer who validates our hopes. The existence, the oneness and the personal concern of God for each person are central elements in the Torah tradition's special and surprising message, and I do not need to close off any part of my brain to affirm this faith.

- You're a rabbi.

I wasn't always.

- How did it happen?

Slowly and quietly. In school everything I studied suggested a creative unity within and behind the universe. History was my field and every place I touched the human experience I sensed the divine capacity of the human soul.

- One day I believe. Another day I don't. I've lain awake many a night wrestling with this question.

Faith, I've decided, is much like love. Some relationships are tempestuous and full of unexpected turns. Some wrestle the long night with their doubts, remember the image of Jacob wrestling with the angel; others simply, often unconsciously, let God in and that's that.

- My father often said that God discussions are pointless and dangerous. The believer cannot convince the atheist, and the atheist cannot convince the believer. Generally, he said, all you had was a shouting match.

Remember the line: Faith is caught not taught. In matters of faith there are no irrefutable arguments; but there are discussions which can help us better understand our feelings and the Torah's affirmations.

Each year I spend a good bit of time discussing the essentials of the Torah tradition with my Confirmation class. I explain as much as can be explained of our concept of God, prayer, and holiness. I tell these fourteen and fifteen-year olds how the Jews were revolted by the gross sexuality and the morbidity of Canaanite and Egyptian paganism; how in a polytheistic environment some of our ancestors came to the inspired vision of the one universal God; how all images, statues, and idols, indeed all representations of God, ultimately were purged; how the prophets insisted on a religion of works, not words; and how belief in the one God encouraged the vision of humanity, a concept which the Israelites were the first to hold. "Have we not all one Father? Has not one God created us all?"

I discuss with them some of the medieval philosophizing about God and His attributes; what we can know about God and what remains forever unknown; and I describe the various ways in which modern thinkers discuss the existence of God. However, once I have described, defined, and explained, much remains, for I am a rabbi, not an historian of religion, and this is a Confirmation class, not a course in comparative religion. I am less concerned with what was once believed as with what these students believe; and so we spend much time talking over their philosophies, not as grand or as ordered perhaps as those of Philo, Maimonides, or Spinoza, but their own, honest.

Fourteen-year olds remind me of butterflies beginning to shake off the restricting cocoon. They have outgrown the protective but circumscribed world in which they were nurtured, they are emerging into a new world; but it is an unfamiliar world and their movements often seem awkward. It's not easy to leave behind with old toys and a favorite teddy bear the God of the nursery, part guardian angel, part doting grandfather, yet this is what is happening. It's a time of doubt and challenge, and these early expressions of doubt are likely to be artless and pragmatic. One had told a lie and had not been caught. One had prayed to God during her grandmother's illness but the grandmother died. An athlete was able to tell me the exact hour and day on which he began to doubt. I still remember that date and time, seven p.m., November 12, 1977. He was in Junior High School at the time. He had an afternoon paper route. He was also captain of an intramural basketball team. Late one school day, an important game was unexpectedly rescheduled. The weather was bad and the boy was unable to bribe or cajole any friend to carry the route for him. In his distress, he entered a phone booth, closed the door and offered God a heartfelt prayer. "I must play this game; let none of my customers complain to the Circulation Manager. Please, God, just this once let me get away with not delivering my papers." At seven p.m. the telephone rang. It was the Circulation Manager. Customers had complained that they had not received their evening paper.

One year I asked a class to set down their beliefs. I asked them not to write what they thought I wanted to read. They didn't. I had brought several of their papers to the Institute and shared them now with the group.

This grim world really scares me. Every once in a while I realize the cruelty and insensibility of it and that's when I begin to wonder. We can't just be here to disagree, fight, and eventually blow ourselves to bits. There must be some purpose or reason behind us. That is when I think of God. This ideal is, in a measure, a crutch to lean on. It gives me some hope for the future. I believe I have outgrown the 'old man in the sky watching over me' type of feeling though I can't really describe what has replaced it. Sometimes I can't really accept God, I know you'd like me to, but I might as well be honest about it - probably because the abstract concept is over my head. When I look around and see the hatred and ugliness, I don't understand how God could allow it. The closest I can come, from my experience, is conscience as that part of us which is created in God's image.

I'm really not sure what I believe about God. I think that there must be something - something larger, better than man, that is within each person helping to draw the line between what is right and what is wrong. I cannot admit to myself that there is a Supreme Being whom we call God. I would like to believe this, I want to believe that when I do something wrong it is all predestined and that there is nothing I can do about it, but I can't. However, there must be something bigger than science guiding life, love, fear and all things. This I do believe. I cannot simply state, 'there lives a God,' because I just don't know. I don't really feel qualified to give an honest opinion.

I have not yet developed any definite ideas about God and I probably won't for a long time. I feel there is some reason and some kind of logic in life and why men live, but I am not saying it is God yet. To me God is a concept which is simply accepted by many - by those who actually study it and then accept it. I feel it is accepted only after accepting certain things on faith. I am not ready to say that a divine something created the earth and controls everything in it. There is too much to make this unbelievable - such as the fact that, if God doesn't like bloodshed, why war? If God wants peace, why battle? If God wants unity among men, why segregation? I feel that man as a society is much too complex to push off on something man doesn't even comprehend. I furthermore think that with advancement will come a totally new idea as to what controls us - an idea which will be able to be expressed in mathematical symbols. I also believe that too many people have looked for an easy out to the whole

> question of life and death and origin and end and have simply attached the tag of 'God' to it all. Something much more complex, in my opinion, is the answer.

- Did you confirm these three?

Certainly. Remember Tennyson: "There is more faith in honest doubt than in half your creeds." For the child faith precedes doubt. For the adolescent doubt precedes faith.

These papers reveal a questing, a puzzling out, and a grasping for. They were written by minds in search - in search of meaning, in search of values - and that is, after all, the first step towards a vital faith. If faith were simply a matter of affirming some self-evident argument, then doubt would be an act of arrogance; but, as Immanuel Kant proved, the existence of God is not a demonstrable proposition. Religious certainty rarely comes without effort and soul-searching, and only the truly innocent never raise Job type questions about God's management of our lives.

- You've had doubts then?

Have had. Have. Will have. In my experience sensitive believers and serious agnostics are not far apart. Both seek to grasp the elusive mystery which lies behind the surface of things. The honest believer acknowledges that he has moments of doubt. The honest agnostic acknowledges moments when he has been awed by nature and sensed a creative purpose.

I told them about a collegian who had had a spiritual awakening; God now meant a great deal to him, and he wanted to know more about the rabbinate as a profession. I happened to have these papers on my desk and I asked him to read several. He read with attention and with

increasing puzzlement: "How can you confirm them? Read this."

> The many morals and standards of our religion greatly influence my life. I believe in living a good moral life as taught by my religion and parents, but I think that religion, nat God so much, seems to affect my life at present. To me God is an abstract word to whom people pray and about whom I am not sure what I believe, since I haven't spent much time thinking about it up to now. I plan to wait so that I can better understand myself before reaching any conclusions about God.

What's the problem?

- He doesn't believe in God. How can you confirm him?

Have you never had doubts?

- Certainly, but I now have faith.

Were you certain as an adolescent, always certain?

- No.

Were you confirmed?

- Yes.

I used an old rabbinic phrase, 'Let your ears hear what your mouth has said.' Confirmation is a stage in one's Jewish growth, not a public testimony to a full and unshakable faith. On Confirmation Day the pledge speaks of belonging and becoming rather than specifically of doctrine, "With all my heart, soul and might, I will strive to fulfill the holy purposes of Judaism."

- Some years ago I went to a friend's Confirmation in her church. It seems to me she recited what the program called a Confession. All I remember is that it began, 'I believe.'

At various times groups and individuals have drawn up what they considered to be the principle of the Jewish faith. Moses Maimonides' Thirteen Articles represent the best known of these efforts. A century later a poet abbreviated Maimonides' extended discussion into thirteen brief statements, each of which begins, 'Ani Ma'amin ,' I believe, and in many synagogues these were recited during services. Other groups and individuals have denied that Judaism demands doctrinal affirmation. Moses Mendelsohn's statement that Judaism has no

dogmas is the best known of these arguments which rest on the assertion that Judaism is a tradition based on deed rather than creed.

– Who was right?

Both and neither. Maimonides was right that Judaism embraces a special message. Mendelsohn was right that rabbinic Judaism has emphasized works rather than words and defines the Jew by membership in the community rather than by an oath of allegiance to a set of doctrines.

I respect this emphasis, because it focuses religious life on a whole range of cultural values rather than on agreement to another's formulation. When I first learned the Ani Ma'amim, I found myself saying: I disagree in whole or part with five of the thirteen: that the Torah was given by God to Moses, that the Torah is immutable, that God rewards and punishes, that a Messiah will come and that there is resurrection of the dead. Later when I read Maimonides' extended explanation of these five articles I found that he treated them sensitively and subtly and that each raised a theme which I no longer dismissed out of hand. The problem with brief dogmatic statements is that they abstract and, in so doing, diminish an idea by pulling it out of the living, developing tradition. Catechism reminds me of a biopsy in which tissue is killed and frozen in order to be examined; and, even as I use this analogy, I recognize why Maimonides was interested in dogmatics. A biopsy is an important diagnostic tool. The state of the faith needs to be examined from time to time.

The label, God, can be used for all kinds of deities. Some precision is important. Maimonides was concerned that Jews acknowledge the Jewish God.

– We haven't got our own God.

I'm talking of perception not possession. The Torah affirms a God who is just, merciful and caring rather than simply a First Cause or a power indifferent to human need.

Twice each day Biblical men stopped their work and spoke a simple watchword, "God is, and God is One." Today the Shema is recited during every service, it is the climactic

and concluding affirmation of Yom Kippur and the final affirmation spoken by the Jew before he dies. Monotheism, the Jew's perception of God, belief in the one God, or at least belief in the unity of all that is, now seems almost a self-evident idea, since it is shared by the major faiths and seems confirmed by our science, which insists that there are overarching, natural laws which bind all that is together.

- I remember a cartoon of a group of monks in the Southwest looking out along the mesa towards a beautiful sunset and calling out: "Author, author." I can't believe that the wonder that is nature is the result of a chemical accident. I once memorized a sentence of Einstein's: "The scientist's religious feeling takes the form of a rapturous amazement at the harmony of natural law which reveals an intelligence of such superiority that, compared with it, all the systematic thinking and acting of human beings is an utterly insignificant reflection."

Monotheism may seem natural to us. It was not to our ancestors.

An early eighteenth century New England Catechism written by a good New England divine who wanted the world to know that had he been God he would have nominated a more appropriate nation as his standard bearer includes the couplet: "How odd that God the Jews should choose." From time to time I have twisted the old doggerel into a different theme: How odd the Jews one God should choose. They lived in a world which they knew to be made up of distinct and separate parts. The moon moved across the night sky and was replaced in the morning by the sun which moved in a different orbit. The wind rose and blew and no man knew from where it came. Streams bubbled up from seemingly bottomless sources. Each element in nature was distinctive and appeared self-actuating. In pre-scientific societies polytheism seemed self-evident since the activity of nature could be explained only by assuming an in-dwelling spirit or god in each element.

- Are you really saying that worshipping idols was more reasonable than monotheism?

The ancients did not actually worship sticks or statues. They saw their idols as

representations of the complex and not totally coherent world of powers which presumedly resided in nature. Open an acorn and you will not find a diminutive oak tree. How else then account for the tree's growth but by the postulate of an indwelling God Who makes it grow in just that way. The sun makes a daily circuit of the heavens, disappears and reappears in the east each dawn. Experience showed that physical objects do not move themselves. How else account for its movement except by some such myth as that of Apollo and his chariot? We sense pattern and order in nature, but we also experience nature's unexpected violence -- the lightning bolt, the flood, the overpowering heat of the sun -- so it was only natural to assume that the gods were not only numerous and powerful but unpredictable. Prudence dictated that worship should envolve not only simple reverence but sacrifices, attempts to entice, to bribe, these powers not to do harm and, if possible, to do what we ask of them.

Since the gods were related to visible objects, it was only natural to believe that the gods were indwelling. Ancient men worshipped at various shrines where particular rites were performed by appointed priests for the purpose of placating the god's anger or gaining favor. The Hebrews, too, had their shrines. It would be centuries before they would outgrow the edifice complex, if they ever really did; but beginning in the eighth century B.C.E. prophets emerged who taught the people that "the whole earth is full of His glory" and that shrine activity should not be the major focus of the religious life.

- I'm fascinated by place. You can tell so much about people from their homes and about a country by the way it keeps up its cities and countryside. I spent a summer wandering in Europe and, after I tired of cathedrals and palaces, I began to look for synagogues. The ones I found were modest in the extreme and intimate. Obviously people counted and felt God to be close, caring rather than a distant, awesome heavenly emperor.

There have been cathedral-type synagogues, but you're right for the most part the synagogue was unpretentious. It was not God's house or the place where a royal audience was held, but the home of a Jewish community where Torah was read, worship celebrated, God adored, and where the Jew was reminded that he was never apart from God.

- I always thought the polytheism-monotheism switch was a relatively harmless numbers game.

Actually, it represents one of the great watersheds in human thought. Monotheism raised God above nature. "In the beginning God created." Man no longer felt himself subservient to the unpredictable forces of nature but covenanted to the Crector God Who, according to Genesis, had given man power to subdue the animal kingdom and to use nature to his benefit. This shift in perspective increased man's self-assurance and sense of worth. It also set the stage for science. Gods cannot be investigated; their actions are autonomous and therefore unpredictable; but, if nature is distinct from God, is not God but object, then there are patterns which the minds can investigate.

The pagan world worshipped its gods and feared them. Their gods, like humans were caught up in private plans and conflicts - the Trojan war began in an argument over the winner of a Heavenly beauty contest - and the activities and whims of the gods often turned out to be harmful to men and nations. You never knew what a god would do, so your relationship to God was more that of courtier to tyrant than son to loving father. "And you shall love the Lord your God" was a new thought which germinated among those who no longer equated nature's unpredictability with the activities of the various gods born and who had begun to conceive and shape worship as thanks-speaking rather than as a form of bribery. Sacrifices remained central to worship as long as The Temple stood; but in their habitations Jews became accustomed to the idea that the sacrifice God truly desires is "a humble and contrite heart."

Idolatry encourages the snobbery which characterized certain tasks as noble and others as demeaning. Blue bloods were descendants of the major gods; orcinary folk were children of a lesser god. Landed gentry held merchants in disrepute. In the pagan world nobles entered a shrine by one door, commoners by another. Monotheism led inevitably to democracy. If all have one father, God values equally the various labors we each do. The Torah tradition became a scholarly tradition, yet no attempt was made to disguise the fact that some of the sages earned their living as shoemakers, smiths, and craftsmen. Jewish folk legend includes

many versions of the city mouse-country mouse variety. There are no menial tasks only mean-minded snobs.

Idolatry separated man from man, city from city, nation from nation. If Ra, the great god of Egypt, created man, the Egyptian was created first and belonged to a master race. All other peoples were the creation, so the myths had it, of the concubines of the gods, consequently a lesser breed. Idolatry consecrated the separation of men into city-states, nations and races, and failed to provide them a unifying vision which would raise humanity's needs above each group's special needs. Racism thrived in the soil of idolatry.

Idolatry separated people by caste and rank. When the emperor of Assyria made known Marduk's law, he proclaimed a rule which protected the persons and privileges of the nobility far more than those of the peasant and lower castes. The slave had no protection at all. If a slave was murdered by a free man, no charge of murder was leveled and the matter was concluded. His owner was paid the dead man's market value as restitution. Idolatry precludes the notion of humanity. Its myths declared the home folk to be descendants of a union between a patron God and a progenitor and other folk to be lesser breeds. Peoples spoke different languages and exhibited different body types; and, since there was no myth of a common ancestor, by all evidence nations and castes were as different from each other as the various species of the animal kingdom. The concept of humanity could emerge only among a people long accustomed to monotheism. If God is one and His reach is world-wide, all peoples are His creatures and a myth such as that of Adam and Eve is developed which binds all humans into a single family! One Creator, one humanity; one moral law for all.

The idolator saw himself as a pawn and plaything of the gods, powerless against fate. Conceiving God as one permitted men to consider the possibility that justice could be expected in life since there was only the one God whose nature was both just and dependable. The pagan felt that you took what the gods meted out. The Hebrew felt that you get what you deserve,

and the goal of a religious life became the building of a worthy personal record rather than offering lavish sacrifices or reciting magical incantations. Monotheism provided worship its ethical dimension. The liturgy of both Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur is shaped on the myth of an annual assize during which the individual's deeds are reviewed by the Supreme Judge. The myth is refracted throughout these services, never more pointedly or poignantly than in a medieval prayer known as the Unetaneh Tokef: "Let us declare the utter holiness of this day for it is one of awe and dread. . . truly You are judge, accuser and all-knowing witness, You write and seal, record and number, remember all things that have been forgotten, open the book of remembrances wherein each deed speaks of itself. Overhead a great shofar is sounded, the angels join in fear and cry out: 'Behold the day of judgment'." The idea that each of us is being constantly judged is a dominant and recurrent theme in the Torah tradition. But God is merciful as well as strict. He will weigh our intentions as well as our deeds, and there is always a second chance. "Repentance, prayer, and righteousness can avert the severe decree."

Idolatry encouraged excessiveness. God is One introduced a welcome measure of balance to ethical discussion. In the pagan myths each of the gods was endowed with specific virtues or qualities. There was a god of love, another of war, another of wisdom. There was a god of life and there was a god of the Kingdom of the Dead. Each god encouraged his communicants to shape their lives around his attribute; but, as Aristotle observed in his Ethics, any virtue taken to excess becomes a vice. The Egyptians so centered their worship on death and immortality that they literally buried in the uncaring sand wealth that might have lifted the burden of abjectness from the masses and guaranteed the nation a prosperous future.

If you worshipped the great Fire god, Maloch, your worship consisted of having a son or daughter walk across burning coals and throw themselves on the fires of the altar. If you belonged to one of the agricultural cults of Canaan you worshipped at a shrine where the earth's fertility was stimulated by orgiastic rite at which worshippers impregnated the shrine's female attendants, a form of sympathetic magic designed to fertilize the earth. In the Torah tradition

children are carefully nurtured, not sacrificed, and the earth's fertility depended on the community's way of life not shrine activity. "If you are willing and obedient, you shall eat the good of the land; but if you refuse and rebel you shall be devoured by the sword."

- Surely there were non-orgiastic cults and kindly idolators?

Yes, and when Jews had separated themselves from the impress of the all-pervading pagan cultures, when that battle had been won and generations of Torah living had fully separated the Jewish psyche, we find some of the sages of the Talmud pointing to men of quality among the pagans and finding value in some elements of their culture. But Judaism never let down its guard against the dangers of idolatry.

Idolatry dethrones God and enthrones some human passion or interest in His place. Some worship themselves. Some worship a guru. The Communists' idol is the ideology they call "scientific Marxism", and those who argue for the untrammeled freedom of the marketplace have an idol called capitalism. We are in danger of regressing into idolatry whenever we care blindly or excessively.

The worship of the master race leads to war, to the grinding down of the poor and the weak under the iron boot; the only wars which the worship of the one God encouraged are the wars against want, injustice, and man's cruelty to his neighbor.

- Why is the Shema possessive of God? "The Lord, our God," God isn't ours.

You've elided the text. The Shema reads: "Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is one." God isn't ours, but we have a special perception of God and a special relationship to God.

- You're talking about the covenant.

Yes, and about Israel's special perception of God. Every theistic religion fills the name, God, with its special perceptions. Israel's God was not only one, beyond any single attribution, but bound to a particular covenant, that is, perceived as both just and gracious.

When the Torah is taken out from the ark the service generally calls for a recitation of a

sentence from Exadus which lists God's attributes: "The Lord, the Lord God is merciful and gracious, long-suffering and abundant in goodness and ever true, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity, transgression and sin." God can be described simply as overwhelming power. The Jewish God was more than mysterious power. He was holy, the model of moral perfection. The consummate duty of the Jew was to pattern himself after God.

- I thought Judaism taught that God could not be described.

It also taught that God had suggested his nature in the Torah. God had clothed the nakedness of Adam and Eve; visited Abraham while he was recovering from surgery; comforted Isaac after the death of his father; reminded Moses of his duty; so, "After the Lord your God shall you walk."

- You're getting ahead of me. You haven't explained how the Israelites made the conceptual leap from idolatry to monotheism?

Some have tried to explain "the Lord is one" as an insight born of living on the edge of empty wilderness. The Hebrews were sheep-herding tribes who lived in the open land between the Canaanite cities and the desert and so nothing stood between them and the sun, the storm, and the sweep of the earth; presumedly, daily experience with the on-rolling cycles of nature sensitized them to the One behind all discrete phenomena.

- That's a dramatic theary, but not convincing. There were many bedouin tribes. Why were the Hebrews the only group to outgrow paganism?

Others reverse the argument and explain monotheism as an insight born of living on the edge of civilization. As desert folk the Israelites watched with detached amusement as one city-state conquered another to be in turn conquered by a third and how, after each overthrow, the victims demoted the gods of the defeated city to a subordinate place in their pantheon. According to this theory, the haplessness of the gods to arrest this endless cycle of victory and defeat led our fathers to seek the unity behind the parade.

- An equally unsatisfactory explanation. It has the same flaw. Apparently only the

Israelites saw the foolishness of all this. Why?

A few historians argue that monotheism was borrowed from the Egyptians. The Exodus story seems to place the Israelites in Egypt in the fourteenth century during a time of great stress when a strong-minded Pharoah, Akhenaton, set out, unsuccessfully, to destroy the power of the priestly elite by overthrowing all the ancient gods but one, the solar disk, Aton, whom he raised as god above all the other deities of Egypt. This theory holds that Akhenaton's Hebrew slaves knew of these events and Moses, basing himself on Akhenaton's lead, proceeded to dedicate his people to a single God, all-powerful, all-embracing, a One. I'll make the arguments against this theory for you. While we are fairly certain of Akhenaton's political motives, we know nothing of his theological concerns, if he in fact was aware of the religious implications of his short-lived reform, and any argument based on cultural borrowing is at best tentative.

- What's your theory?

That God revealed His Oneness. Frankly, we have no better explanation. When Israel was still young, a man, it may have been Moses the prophet, we know not exactly who, found a commanding voice speaking to him and reached out with his mind into the darkness and wrenched from the darkness the vision of the one God. Science did not demand it, indeed, reasonable men, including the best minds of the next thousand years, argued against it; but, somehow, a few men reached out and understood.

- You don't actually believe that God spoke to Moses out of a burning bush?

The bush is an element in a dramatic myth which like many myths is truer than if it were literally true. Sometimes when you puzzle over a problem a totally unexpected answer flashes into your mind. I believe that Moses, or another, puzzled over the incongruities of idolatry and that in his mind a new understanding of the creative and mysterious reality behind the world of thirgs and appearances began to take shape. I believe in radical surprise which is what I believe is meant by revelation.

- Do you mean that God actually described Himself to Moses?

Franz Rosenzweig suggested some years ago that the Torah's language describing Sinai, "and God came down and God spoke," should be carefully considered. "God came down," he said, concludes the revelation; "God spoke" begins Moses' interpretation. The miracle is that God, meaning, presented itself; once it is present a human mind appropriates the idea and expresses it as best it can.

- Hold up. I'm confused. I know Judaism teaches God's oneness, but I've been reading I. B. Singer and his stories are full of demons and spirits. If God is One and these stories are where authentic, do all these lesser gods come from? Is Judaism really a monotheist tradition?

In terms of theology, yes. In terms of popular credulities, no. The faith consistently has proclaimed God alone. When stories were told of spirits or demons, an attempt was made to make clear that these were not independent powers. God has dominion over all that is, the seen and the unseen. Satan in the Job story is not an independent power but an angel in God's court who must get God's permission before Job can be tested. The theory was that all the angels and spirits, what was called the "Family of Heaven", did God's will, but official theology was often compromised by popular faith.

- Popular faith is just a euphemism for superstition.

Jews were often superstitious. Were, Are.

Life is full of premonitions which are not fully understood and of unexpected experiences; moreover, before medicine discovered germs and viruses, how else was disease to be explained

Before you feel too superior remember that ours is the Age of Aquarius. Oneness is a concept which is hard for the mind to grasp. How do you envision what cannot be seen, touched, or described?

- But I'm not superstitious.

Then why are you wearing a Hai emblem around your neck?

- It's my identification as a Jew.

Don't you feel just a bit unprotected when you forget to put it on?

– Enough. I've got another question. Why did our ancestors take axes to Canaan's idols? I know a collector who will pay thousands of dollars for those statues. They're quite beautiful. Weren't they being fanatics? We don't go around knocking other people's religions, much less cutting down their shrines.

The Torah insists that there was to be no accommodation with idolatry. "Obliterate the foreign gods that are in your midst." Pagan high places must be torn down and ploughed under. The sacred groves must be cut down and the wood used for fuel. Foreign gods were mocked. They were vanity, nothingness, shameful and worse. Idolatry equated the gods and power. Ancient Israel had no National Conference of Idolators and Jews.

– That's my point.

You're still caught up in the 'religions are necessarily good' syndrome. Those who came to see the world with Torah-instructed eyes recognized that idolatry supported indecency, injustice, the separation of races and, worst of all, perpetuated an understanding of God which was not morally inspiring. Civilization required that the cry of animism on the human spirit be broken. What they attempted and ultimately achieved was no less than a complete revision of the most cherished values of a long-lived and coherent culture.

– All that's history. Idolatry died with the pagan world. No one makes idols.

Don't they? What are those plastic figures I see on so many car dashboards? Innocent, you say? Perhaps, unless the driver is convinced that because they are there he can floor the accelerator pedal without danger.

– You'll admit you're stretching a point.

I'll agree that idol making is not a growth industry, but idolatry still thrives.

The Torah defines as idolatry the worship of anything real or imaginary other than God Himself. One such idol is named pride of birth and another pride of place. There is the deity of the white skin and the deity of color. What of the patron god of the self-righteous nation? We are scandalized that some ancients offered human sacrifices. I put to you that each decade

or so we offer a holocaust of our best and brightest to the god of national ambition, or is it the god of national greed?

Idolatry comes easily. We tend to project into the heavens a rather indulgent deity who forgives us for our foibles, applauds us vigorously for our trivial accomplishments, encourages us in our low moments and who is careful not to reprimand us for enjoying leisure and security without thought to the needs of others. Who of us has not been tempted to love excessively a parent, a cause, a possession, a charismatic leader, a party, the state? When I recite the Shema I am reminded forcefully that there is only one love which cannot be excessive and that all other commitments must be conditional. It matters very much whether you worship the Jewish God or some other god.

It was getting late. I suggested a related thought to mull over at services. A person never rises above the God whom he worships.

Chapter 9

THE GOD WHO LETS US CRY

Late at night. The service had been a warm moment. A few of us had retired to the oldtimer's bunk. Coffee, doughnuts and quiet talk. For some reason, I had been rambling on a bit about a recent trip to China.

The astronauts reported that the Great Wall was the only man-made object they could identify from space. Jewish history, like the Great Wall, is vast, sweeping and highly visible. One of the special feelings I enjoy as a Jew is that I am part of a truly significant enterprise which will outlive me.

- There is no particular virtue in longevity. I know folk who have lived into their nineties and whose accomplishments only charity would allow me to describe as modest. Despite Grandma Moses types, the last years usually are uncreative, a time for sitting around and being cared for. Old age is a cane and failing eyesight. Besides, there are a lot of old folks around: Egyptians, Greeks, the Chinese.

Jewish history is not only a long story but a mysteriously significant one. There have never been a lot of Jews but there is hardly an era in which the Jewish presence has not been notable.

- With all due respect, rabbi, aren't you deluding yourself? I remember a survey course in world history I took as a college freshman. We spent a day on the Israelites and the Hebrew Bible. The prof talked about its original ideas but made it clear that the Bible's importance to Western civilization was due largely to Christianity's later interest in it. After that lecture neither the Jewish people nor any Jewish contributions to civilization were mentioned until the last week when we talked about the political implications of modern anti-semitism. He talked for some time about anti-semitism's long history: exiles, forced conversions, the ghetto,

and the gas chamber. I draw no encouragement from our lengthy record as history's most available victim.

I quoted Justice Brandeis: "The Jew gave to the world its three greatest religions, reverence for law, and the highest conceptions of morality," but even as I did I knew that the judge's testimony did not adequately make my case, so I resorted to a question: why do you think the Jew was such a frequent victim?

- We were there and a minority.

- The Christ-killer myth.

- We wouldn't be baptized.

I look on the world's antipathy as a perverse tribute to the power of the ideas to which the Torah tradition witnesses. The privileged encouraged anti-semitism because they knew that the themes of democracy and justice are sanctified in the Hebrew Bible; and ideologues of the left went along with anti-semitism because the Torah tradition values each person and rejects any claim that noble ends justify immoral means or that the individual must subordinate his rights to the collective.

- I'm not sure I follow your analysis. Anti-semitism describes prejudice against Jews not Jewish ideas.

The Jew, the black, any distinctive outsider is what he is and what the majority think him to be. The Jew internalized many Torah values and the non-Jew projected on to the Jew what he assumed Judaism stood for. We denied his religion, so it was almost inevitable that he should see us as subversive.

Kings claimed the right to rule as they saw fit, the Hebrew tradition rejected all claims to absolute authority. Priests and popes believed they controlled the keys to the kingdom, but Jews acted as if they knew that the Archangel Gabriel would let them in. Monks denied basic physical needs believing God valued a life of celibacy, while rabbis married and went out into the world. Theologians explained that the Bible foretold Christ but the Jews, who alone could

read the original text, insisted otherwise. Simply by being, the Torah challenged all claims to arbitrary authority and privilege.

- Oh come on, they went after us because we would not bow to their gods, play in their games, or eat in their restaurants.

Prejudice begins in the myths of the bigoted, not in the acts of the calumnied.

- There are prejudices and prejudices. I've always wondered why anti-semitism has appealed to so many so powerfully.

It's one of the few prejudices which has religious sanction. Its roots are in the New Testament text and it retains vitality because of the authority which millions still ascribe to those documents.

- Are you saying the New Testament aids and abets prejudice?

The gospel writers, aided and abetted by Paul, set up the Torah tradition as the straw man against which they could score polemical points. They stereotyped Judaism as a dry and lifeless legalism and Jewish leaders as lying hypocrites and narrow-minded priests. They mocked the Jewish way as deadly to the spirit and twisted historic fact to make the Jew rather than Pontius Pilate responsible for the Crucifixion. In the Gospels, as you know, Jews cry out for Jesus' death. It didn't hurt their argument that many in their Roman audiences were prepared to look on Jews as enemies of legitimate authority, obstinate rebels who refused to see the value of the Pax Romana.

Some Church Fathers went further and developed what Jules Isaac has called a theology of contempt whose basic thesis was that God had ordered that the Temple be destroyed as punishment for their crimes and sentenced the Jews to eternal wandering. God meant for the Jew to be punished, and obviously no God-fearing person would go against God's will. Christians were made to feel that they obeyed God when they forced the Jew to wear a demeaning costume, denied the Jew standing in law, and set up the rules of apartheid which governed Christian-Jewish relations for fifteen hundred years. The Greek orthodox theologian, Nicholas Berdyaev, said it

well: "Perhaps the saddest thing to admit is that those who rejected the Cross have to carry it, while those who welcomed it are so often engaged in crucifying others."

- Why didn't anti-semitism weaken over the centuries as most myths do?

Because there we were. Because the Gospel story could not be revised. Because our presence kept alive ideas and values which challenged the self-confident assumptions of the majority.

A century ago the ministers of the Czar talked candidly about their policy of deliberately forcing the Jews from Russia because Jews were Typhoid Marys who spread ideas like democracy and freedom which were unwelcome in that absolutist society. Centuries earlier the medieval church, not only locked up the Hebrew Bible lest the faithful read and question official doctrine, but forbade those who could read the text, the Jews, from discussing it with Christians lest they be led into heresy.

Because Christianity claimed to be the truth, but the Jew was obstinate and would not see 'the truth'. For those to whom Christian teachings seemed self-evident, Jewish non-agreement could only be explained as due to a spiritual blindness, a deformity God had placed on all Jews until the Second Coming. Otherwise, they would have had to admit the inadmissible that there were valid reasons to doubt the Church's confidence in its teachings. We have seen religion's certifying function. The Jews' simple presence was a challenge to Christian confidence.

To probe into the causes of anti-semitism is to understand something of what the Jew has meant to civilization.

- I'm not sure I like the idea of being a whipping boy because the world is protective of familiar ideas and unwarranged privileges.

It's not been an unrelieved horror story. During the Biblical period the Jewish experience was not particularly bitter; and, in many places since, there have been extended periods of quiet settlement.

- But the fact remains that we've had more than our share.

I'm not quite sure what a fair share is. Let's not play the 'who's suffered most' game. History tells us that there has been a great deal of suffering and that the world is not a fair place. Why are some born to luxury and some into the poverty of Bangladesh. The question to which faith suggests an answer is, shall we bless God or blame God for making the world as it is.

- Bless God?

Would our Jewish community be as sensitive to social welfare issues and civil rights if our history had been a happier one. The Torah's teachings are sensitive and noble, but in the end only words. I am convinced that Jews owe their instinct for justice equally to Amos and apartheid and that many of the fine qualities which are expressed by the Jewish community: compassion, empathy, a pragmatic attitude towards success; open-handed generosity and impatience with privilege are the result of bitter experience.

- Come off it. My father, an old socialist, keeps reminding me that it was a Jew who owned the sweat shop where he first worked.

Not all Jews are sensitive or charitable or committed to social justice; but a remarkable number were and are. The ghetto was a dismal place whose high walls rarely let in the sunlight, but within this cramped area Jews constructed a remarkably compassionate community.

A medieval Jewish community was a miniature welfare state, replete with groups which provided dowries for poor girls, travel money for the stranded, medicine for the sick, tuition for those requiring scholarship aid, as well as direct financial assistance for the poor.

- Aren't you rationalizing?

- The real issue is God. Why did Jews have to face such a cruel existence? Where was God? Why did God let Jews suffer as they have? Your analysis of anti-semitism suggests that God has nothing to do with history; if He hasn't, then the Torah tradition with its emphasis on Divine Providence falls apart and Auschwitz marks the end of the line for any pious talk about a God who cares.

Recently a man wrote me an angry letter about God. His brother had died during open heart surgery. Apparently the surgery had been botched. His brother had been an active Jew all his life. How could God have allowed this to happen?

I wrote back that God had not performed the operation or decided to have it performed. The mistakes were medical ones. If we praise God for freedom, a mind and will of our own, then we must be prepared not to blame him for human decisions which are harmful or have undesired results. The blessing of freedom is medical research. The price medical error.

- What has this to do with Auschwitz?

German engineers built Auschwitz, not God.

- What kind of God would create such a world?

What kind of God wouldn't? Would you want to live without freedom, as a prisoner of your instincts?

For us to have some control of our lives, God had to let go of certain controls over history. War is a human achievement, not God's. The gift of self-consciousness, the quality which distinguishes the human being from the animal, requires that history depend in part on our activity and judgment. Growth requires the possibility that our actions may be terribly wrong.

- But why doesn't God stop war?

Because we're adults not angry children who need to be pulled apart by a gym instructor. How will we learn if we don't have to suffer the consequences of our actions? We're back to the paradox that if God were to restrict man's freedom and power He would be narrowing our responsibilities and diminishing our control over our lives. If our capacity for mischief were diminished, so would our capacity for significant achievement. The point is God did not make us inadequate to the moral challenges we face.

- But we don't seem to learn.

Is that God's problem or ours? It would be God's problem if He had given us freedom but no reason or will or instruction. The point is we know better than to murder millions. We

have sufficient will power to discipline our actions. The simple truth is that God has not failed us. We fail God.

War and apartheid are human activities which God could override only by stripping us of the privilege of freedom. At creation God gave us all we needed. Before peoples cut down the jungle and overcropped the land, Bangladesh supported a thriving civilization. Most human suffering is the fault of other humans.

- We were talking about yellow badges, pogroms, Stalin, Hitler, and Arab wars against Israel. Why continue a pilgrimage which obviously angers or frightens many?

An anonymous prophet who lived among the Judean exiles in Babylon offered an image which you might want to think about. Those were difficult years. The Temple had been destroyed. Jerusalem had been razed. Many had been physically uprooted and exiled. A question of significance faced those who thought about the Jewish religion. 'What could an exiled people, prisoners and little esteemed, contribute to the unfolding of history. He answered his own question. Their role was to be God's suffering servants. They were to proclaim God's will by example and by word to nations comfortable with idolatry and the limited values of the pagan world. The sleeper wants only to squash the noisy mosquito which buzzes around his head so that he can go back to his slumber, "so Israel was despised, forsaken of man, a people of pain from whom others hid their faces." Israel is the nagging conscience of the world. As long as Israel remains, the world's sleep will be fitful.

- But why lay all this on the Jews?

I don't know. Remember: "seek not to explain God's ways to man because those are beyond your understanding."

- That's a copout.

Only if you believe everything can be explained.

- But the world never seems to learn.

I'm not sure of that. It seems to me that much of the world has awakened to life's possibilities. I often think of Dickens' famous sentence: "It was the best of times. It was the worst of times." Billions are spent on weapons, and millions seek to throw off the limitations of ignorance and insensitivity. Millions seem to be listening to God and choosing life.

The death camps are a truth, but not the whole truth. What about Hitler's bomb shattered bunker in Berlin and 1948 and the creation of the State of Israel? Think again about the mysterious significance of Jewish history.

- But six million did not survive to contemplate the mysterious significance of Jewish history.

I know, and I cry and remind myself of what I do not understand and of the psalmist's faith: "though He slay me, yet will I believe in Him." I don't have answers, but I am a Jew and my myths describe the hardships of the wilderness trek and arrival in the Promised Land and the fact that, if the tribes had not repeatedly rejected the will of God, clear duty, they would have reached Canaan much sooner.

- Your approach is a bracing one; but many Nazis survived the war and became prosperous in post-war Germany, and the six million were dead. To say we are responsible for our world is to address only part of the problem. The other part, the faith shattering part, is the suffering of the innocents.

You're right, of course. I have no answer. At this point reason must give way to faith. I know only this, that I owe it to my past not to abandon our witness to truths mankind cannot afford to deny for the price of rejection is the end of civilization.

After a moment, I turned back to the problem of God and suffering.

Some of our confusion comes from a controlling image of God which is, to put it kindly, childish. Over the centuries the Torah tradition has fought a brave battle to disabuse us of the image of God as a kindly Heavenly Grandfather.

- But the prayer book speaks of God as kind, merciful and just and as a God who hears

our prayers.

It also says that God knows our prayers before we utter them, that God's kindness and mercy depend on a wisdom deeper than any we can imagine, and that God knows our needs before we are ever conscious of them and His goodness is manifest in creation and not proven by whether He permits our petitions or denies them.

One of the tradition's favorite names for God was makom - place - God is the animating spirit of all that is. Such a God creates a world full of possibility and it is up to man to meet the challenge.

- In effect, you're saying that prayer has many psychological advantages: it releases pent-up feelings, focuses our thoughts and opens up emotional reserves; but is not efficacious in the sense of making God respond to our needs.

I guess we all pray at times for a miracle. Abe Lincoln said it: I find myself down on my knees when I have no place else to go. That kind of prayer is elemental and explosive rather than a product of sober reflection. The Torah tradition reflects both need and reason. God responds to prayer and man should not pray, sit back and depend on God to do His thing.

- I can't get beyond the horror that six million were killed.

And many millions more. Jews were not the only victims. You ask for reasons. Reasons are words. These events are elemental and beyond reason's grasp. They cannot be explained, but they can be transcended. Ultimately reason must give way to faith if we are not to be paralyzed by our inability to explain. If life were reasonable, people would never have created religions. There would have been no need. Remember religion's function is to confirm and affirm an ultimate purpose - to prove that chaos does not rule the world. Faith allows us to carry on despite the cruelties we experience. The watchwords of the Bratzlaver Hassidim says it simply: Gewalt, Yiden, zeit sich nit meyaesh - for God's sake, Jews, do not despair. These words only repeat the Psalmist's pledge: "though He (God) slay me, yet will I believe in Him." Faith describes convictions held despite contradictory experiences. The Hebrew word for faith

is emunah which comes from a root which means holding firm.

- Holding firm to what?

To a recognition of the possibilities of life. To the discovery of the holy dimensions of our existence. To God's promise that a life of concern can make a difference.

- I wonder sometimes.

Our problem is that we are less bound up than earlier Jews with the Messianic promise of our faith and half suspicious that we are consoling ourselves with fiction.

- Are we?

I think not. Recent history cannot be read as unrelieved tragedy. Sweeping political and social changes are taking place. The masses are coming alive and their individuality and potential is being revealed. An unsettled society is full of frustration and potential violence; but our convulsions also suggest our potential for effective change. You can't have the one without the other. The ancients knew this. Almost every scenario about the Messianic Age assumes that it will be preceded by a time of unprecedented trouble. The most famous of these images is a homely one. Just as a child's delivery is preceded by birth pangs, the Messianic Age, according to tradition, will be preceded by the birth pangs of the Messiah.

- How does one acquire such a faith?

It's a matter of opening up the inner eye, of seeing what is always there but which we rarely notice, being preoccupied as we are with the routine demands of life.

- Isn't faith simply self-hypnosis?

Illusion has no basis in reality. I quoted a few lines from Abraham J. Heschel.

> Faith does not spring out of nothing. It comes with the holy dimensions of our existence. . . . Faith does not detach man from thinking. It does not suspend reason. It is opposed, not to knowledge, but to indifferent aloofness to the essence of living. . . . Faith is the insight that life is not a self-maintaining private affair, not a chaos of whims and instincts, but an aspiration, a way, not a refuge.

- That's a bit poetic for me; but I think I see what you're driving at. But I don't want to get detoured into a discussion of faith in the abstract. Our question is specific: Why have the

Jews suffered more than any other group?

They haven't. Some day read a history of the Ameneans or the Druzes. Jews have had our share and more, but I doubt that we're number one on the most persecuted list.

- Then why have Jews suffered as much as they have?

Deuteronomy offers one explanation: you get what you deserve. I'm talking about covenant theology, the old idea that God rewards loyalty and punishes disloyalty. The prophets who applied this grading system to contemporary events insisted that Israel's sufferings - they meant everything from bad harvests to military defeat - were the result of the community's failure to live up to the terms of the covenant. This view provided, until our day, one of the myths through which the Jew has explained to himself his fate. It runs this way. At Sinai we signed on to the covenant and agreed to its conditions, including a list of rewards for obedience and punishments for default. The prophets of Israel "heard" God "render judgment". When defeat came it was seen as a deserved punishment, "Because they sell the righteous for silver and the needy for a pair of shoes and trample the head of the poor in the dust of the earth . . . Therefore . ."

- I find it infinitely sad that some Jews went to their deaths in Nazi Europe, beating their breasts and confessing, 'It is because of our sins.'

So do I. So did the writers of apocalypse who followed the prophets who insisted in their writings that God determines the course of history for His own purposes. There's some truth to both contentians. A nation that plays the power game will at some point find that it's no game, but I don't believe that life operates like a classroom, that hard and conscientious work guarantees good grades. At best, to quote our sages, the reward of the good deed is the deed itself. Job's challenge to his comforters who defended the operation of God's grading system was based solidly on experience; I've seen some healthy and prosperous bastards; yet, I must add that over time there does seem to be something of a balancing out. Israel is, and many a more powerful empire is not. I also believe that there are spiritual rewards which do not depend

on wealth or security: "Better a small morsel and quiet therewith than a house full of feasting and strife."

- You're beginning to sound like one of Job's comforters.

Their observations of human nature were often accurate. They argued that suffering is good for the soul, that through storms we grow. Prosperity, they said, tends to make us oblivious to human need. Grief and pain can expose our latent capacity for empathy. I knew a young couple, born to wealth, who were devoted to nothing beyond themselves until a child developed a rare and dangerous blood disease. Forced out of themselves they grew into caring people and have devoted much time to the support of pediatric medicine.

- Where did they go wrong?

Though keen observers of the human condition, the religious understanding was conventional and uninspired. They told Job that suffering represents a trial which allows God to measure human character. They tried to justify God's ways to man and, as we've seen, this can't be done.

- This trial idea suggests that God may be a bit of a sadist.

Job in his pain says as much: "God crushes me for a trifle and increases my wounds without cause."

The comforters simply closed their eyes to the fact that there are times when the suffering is so intense that it coarsens the soul and deadens the spirit. I will never forget the concentration camp survivor who explained patiently why she had decided not to have children: 'I simply can't let myself feel that deeply any more.'

Much suffering is avoidable, certainly more than we generally admit. God did not
to live is to be bruised,
build Auschwitz and Maidenek, but suffering is also part of the given life; and we do not fully understand its function. We may never understand so our challenge is to master our condition and not be defeated by it.

- I find it terribly sad when someone says that you get what you deserve. A baby doesn't deserve to die. Few among the poor really deserve their poverty. Certainly none of us

would claim that the well-off and well-placed are simply enjoying their just desserts.

It has another pernicious effect. It suggests to some that an accident or illness is somehow deserved. When I visit someone recently bereaved, I often hear: 'what did I do to deserve this?' as if the widow is somehow guilty for her husband's death.

- Much of what you are saying suggests that God is indifferent to the individual's fate?

Not indifferent but, at the same time, not bound to do what we want.

Do you remember the end of the Book of Job? Job has challenged God's justice, but God makes no attempt to explain himself to Job. God simply reveals His majesty to him. "Where were you when I rolled out the Heavens?" In a long poem God parades the mysterious and vast operation of creation, His creation, and Job submits: "I know that You can do anything . . . I had heard of You, the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees You. Therefore, I abhor my words and repent. . ."

Walter Kaufman, in an interesting work, The Faith of a Heretic, describes Job's response as acquiescence to the "tragic power" of the world. "This is the ultimate truth of philosophy. There is a power beyond us and the power makes no sense except that it is there, and man must, as best he can and with what composure and equanimity he can muster, simply accept life on its terms." I think Kaufman is mistaken in his analysis. God parades before Job, not cold and indifferent power, but creative power. God seems to be saying: creation is not a chaotic structure but a well-designed universe. There is a mysterious and wonderful order. You cannot fathom the totality of that purpose, but you can sense it. Rudolf Otto put it this way: "When we envisage certain things in our world, such as the starry sky, the thickly-people ocean, the orderliness and the progressiveness of life, and give them the keenest and clearest scientific description in our power, there is left in our mind a feeling of the Holy or the Sacred."

From the perspective of Torah, Kaufman is a heretic. He does not deny God but he

denies that there is a creative purpose. Faith begins with a recognition of benign purpose. After each stage of creation, Genesis one uses the refrain, "And God saw that it was good."

- I keep measuring your comments against the Holocaust. How can you have faith in a benign order having lived through such evil?

I have no answer. The Holocaust is overwhelming. How does one think about the malignancy called Naziism or the adamant enforcement of restrictive immigration quotas into Palestine, England and the United States by the Allies? On one level this sad record must restrain our enthusiasm for notions about man's basic and innate goodness. But it also must be said that there were non-Jews of compassion and bravery who put their lives at stake to hide Jews and help them escape. We're back to the familiar question: was the Holocaust God's fault or man's? If life is to include possibility, the possibility must include evil as well as heroism.

- Isn't the point that God did not interfere. Millions prayed for relief and none was sent.

Do you remember the story I told several days ago about Moses visiting the Academy of Akiba and being astonished at the rules Akiba was quoting as the law of Moses? I didn't complete the story as the Talmud reports it. After God had reassured Moses that what Akiba was teaching was in fact Torah, Moses says to God: 'How is it that knowing such a sage would arise, you gave the Torah through me?' To which God answered, 'Be silent, such is My decree.' God then allowed Moses to see the rest of Akiba's life and his death. He was burned alive by the Romans during the Bar Kochba Rebellion and his skin sold in the marketplace. Moses was appalled: 'Is this the reward for such learning and devotion?' 'Be silent, for such is My decree.'

- I'm appalled.

Some things must be accepted. Our sages defined atheism not as the denial of the existence of God, the Walter Kaufman's of our world are prepared to use God's name as a label for mindless power, but as the denial of God's justice: Le'it din ve'leit dayan, there is no

justice and there is no judge. No one ever suggested that faith comes easily. We've got to face Akiba's martyrdom and the suffering of the Jewish people. But without faith the soul withers and shrivels and there is no reason to stay with the great causes of the human race.

- You can't leave it there.

Akiba's martyrdom inspired generations of men and women who had to put their lives on the line for what they believed.

- That's not enough.

I know. No argument eases suffering. When my heart aches, sweet reason is not the medicine I need. At such times I want to be listened to and not to be talked at. I need love not logic. Any explanation offered me seems irrelevant.

I have been a rabbi for nearly thirty years and have spent a fair amount of time close to illness and grief. As a young rabbi I expected to hear those beaten to their knees cry out in anger and deny. I have heard complaints, certainly, and self-pity, 'why me'; but I have rarely known anyone whose faith was completely shattered by illness, ill luck or pain. Somehow, when we are on our knees we look up and sense a transcending wisdom. The life force takes over and more often than not what I hear is a half-whispered, half-believing, 'maybe it's for the best.'

- I can't get the Akiba story out of my mind. It suggests that God has an arbitrary streak and is really a cruel God.

What it really suggests is that there are facets to life we cannot explain and must learn to accept. Consciousness is given. Our endowments are given. Death is a given and so are illness and pain.

I often think of what the psychiatrist, Viktor Frankl, wrote out of his personal experience as a death camp inmate:

> Whenever one is confronted with an inescapable, unavoidable situation, whenever one has to face a fate which cannot be changed, e.g. an incurable disease, such as an incurable cancer; just then one is given a last chance to actualize the highest value, to fulfill the deepest meaning, the meaning of

suffering. For what matters above all is the attitude we take towards suffering, the attitude in which we take our suffering upon ourselves.

- Are you saying: Make the best of a hapless bargain?

The rabbis weren't stoics. They were not resigned to a hapless world. There were joys and happy days. They trusted that God would accept repentance and end the Exile. Our worship always includes prayer: "Hear us, O Lord, and we shall be healed. Save us and we shall be saved."

There is a pragmatic side to the Torah tradition which says, 'live, do the right, don't ask too many questions, keep the faith.' The Hebrew letter Bet is the first letter of the first word in the Torah. Why B rather than A? Simple, the sages said. The Hebrew letter is formed by three strokes which enclose three sides of a square, " ". Since Hebrew is written from right to left, the missing side opens towards the flow of the text. Bet, they said, was chosen as a sign that the Jew should read what follows, the Torah, carefully and not worry too much about what cannot be known: what is above, what below and what preceded creation.

- I've heard all you've said, but you've really not resolved the problem of suffering.

I know. The Mishnah quotes R. Yannai as saying that we cannot explain the prosperity of the wicked or the impoverishment of the good. I would add that Torah seeks to arm us with rituals which will help us hold on to sanity when the pressures mount. Before death, the dying spoke the Shema. After death the mourners speak the Kaddish. In stress we are advised to affirm life and God. The Kaddish also speaks of the inevitable coming of Kingdom.

Every Jewish act has a Messianic element to it. We are conditioned to hope. "Weeping may tarry for the night, but with the morning there is joy." The Gates of Eden may be locked behind us, but at some point the Gates of Paradise will open. God lets us cry and He tells us to look through our tears to life's possibilities. No easy task, but an ennobling one.

It was late. Time to close with a story. This one was first told by the sixteenth century martyrologist, Salomon ibn Verga, about the persecution and exile of the Jews of Spain and Portugal.

A ship was stricken with plague and the captain made for the nearest land fall where he unceremoniously left the passengers on a deserted beach. Many died there of hunger. A few, including a Jew, his wife and two sons, tried to make it on foot to some settlement. They walked with great effort but it proved too much for the woman who collapsed and died. The man carried his two sons until he fainted from exhaustion. When he revived he found the boys dead beside him. In great distress he rose to his feet and said: Lord of the universe, You are doing a lot to make me abandon my faith. I am a Jew and a Jew I shall remain and nothing that you have brought upon me or will bring upon me shall avail.

Chapter 10

THE GENERATION GAP, GUILT AND GOD

Shabbat afternoon. A morning service, written and organized by Institute members, had been read and enjoyed. There was a happy feeling of community.

- "I like it here. There's no dressing up. There's song and touching. I don't like services at home. The pews are uncomfortable, the service is a set piece, everyone's dressed up and uptight."

How often at home do you come to a service after five days of Jewing? Rather, you walk in cold. You've been thinking of work or finances. You sit yourself down and challenge the service to move you.

- It's also the guitar, open shirts and singable tunes.

The forms of Jewish worship have always conformed to personal need and cultural style. There always have been a variety of ways to express one's faith. Maimonides worshipped at home with a few disciples in quiet dignity next to the bustle of an active synagogue whose noise he deplored. The problem is not guitar or organ, or open shirt or ties, but how to make sure the spirit is full and the environment truly representative of the Torah spirit. When there were shrines, sacrifices, and priests, Jews had shrines, sacrifices, and priests. In cultures when worshippers and courtiers prostrated themselves to express humble submission, Jews, like Muslims to this day, prostrated themselves. Pews and a gowned clergy are eighteenth century forms. The guitar is late twentieth century.

In former times these differences tended to follow geographic lines; Yemenite Jews sit cross-legged on prayer rugs; Polish Jews prayed standing before tall reading desks. Today these divisions tend to be generational. Some synagogues have an adult service and a youth service on Friday night. Adolescents don't want to sit in pews, pews are straight and confining. They're not ready to sit quietly and listen to somebody preach; they want dialogue,

not a sermon. They want intensity, to do it themselves, not the calm of an organ playing over them nor the artistry of a cantor singing for them.

The modern synagogue often seems to be a three-ring circus. In one ring is the cantor, the prayer book, the reading of the Torah, a thoughtful sermon, and the formal rites of the tradition; in another there is a guitar, a mimeographed service, wordless dance, and a friendship circle; while in the third ring there is a family service full of simple songs, cut-down prayers, a story sermon, wriggling children and beaming parents. The young claim to be put off by the formality of adult worship. Adults are often nonplussed by hand clapping sing-alongs and the use of audio-visual equipment. Each service reflects the emotional, psychological, and physical needs of its congregation.

- Didn't these generational differences exist in earlier generations?

As far as I know, no. Adolescence seems to be a modern phenomenon. In medieval times boys entered the adult work world quite early. Today young people live amid their peers, in a different atmosphere than their parents; and, consequently, their attitudes, aesthetics, and play are distinct.

- There is a formal order of service. That's what Siddur means. How can you approve disorder?

I was talking of style more than content, but recognize that Jewish worship is not a set piece. The Siddur is not a closed book. Its basic structure took shape in Mishnaic times, but much has been added and, from time to time, elements have been dropped. In terms of spirit and style hitlahavot, genuineness, takes precedence over form. The medieval synagogue was a tumultuous and noisy place. Jews stayed for hours and gossiped even as they worshipped. They were familiar with each other and with their God. The medieval Jew had nothing else to do and no other place to go. There were no movies, no radio or television, probably no other public space in his town; so he lengthened the service and, not accustomed to privacy, denied it a place.

Emancipation changed all this. The emancipated Jew no longer enjoyed enforced leisure born of underemployment. These were the years of the twelve-hour day. The service had to be shortened. He was now part of a larger world and aware of its aesthetics. The familiar swaying came to seem inappropriate, since middle-class burghers sat silently in pews. As decorum and discipline took over, some of the old sense of involvement was lost. The balance shifted swiftly and the congregation became increasingly an audience, and worship tended to become what it had never been before and never ought to be - a spectator sport.

- But I respond to intimacy and participation.

Needs and attitudes have shifted again. We live in a world fascinated by soul and roots. We're intrigued by the imagination more than the mind. So the guitar replaces the organ, and congregations experiment with dance, citing the precedent of the Hassidim. Whatever the shortcomings of the new style services, they have, at least, the virtue of liveliness and in worship immediacy is critical.

- You talk of guitar music as if it were everywhere. We belong to an orthodox synagogue where instrumental music on the Sabbath is forbidden.

The Temple in Jerusalem featured a choir and orchestra of Levites and, when it was destroyed, instrumental music was banned as a sign of mourning for the destroyed Temple. During the Renaissance some traditional communities in Italy built an organ into their synagogue, which they played on weekdays though not many an orthodox synagogue brings in a folk singing, guitar playing rebbe in a similar way.

- What's your feeling about all this?

I look on the issue pragmatically. God, we are told, should be worshipped in the beauty of holiness, and beauty is in the eye of the beholder. Each congregation must decide what setting inspires them. There is no right or wrong. Why is a cantor more appropriate than a choir? Why is one musical setting for a prayer more appropriate than another? Priests danced in the Jerusalem Temple. The medieval synagogue had no pews. Kabbalists held all-night vigils. The Hassidim often told of the illiterate shepherd boy who played his flute in

the synagogue on Rosh Hashanah because he didn't know the Hebrew words, and that his was the voice welcomed into Heaven. It's not the medium but the message.

- But isn't the medium also the message?

The Torah chant is an old and formal one. Many hymns are set to familiar melodies and we respond instinctively to them. But to make too much of the familiar is itself a danger. Worship must offer a challenge as well as tradition.

- Some years ago our youth group put together a creative service out of Bob Dylan and Kahil Gibran. It was moving but our rabbi had a fit. Why can't our service be whatever we want?

The worship hour is designed to be a Jewish experience, not just a spiritual happening.

- I don't understand.

In worship Jews immerse themselves in the Torah tradition. Readings from Gibran and Thomas are not a Torah experience.

- You make worship parochial, but you told us earlier that prayer is an elemental and universal form of expression. Why do you insist that a service have a Jewish atmosphere? Aren't good thoughts enough?

- I once heard a minister talk on worship. He argued that the church takes itself too seriously; that the religious moment must be a celebration of possibility, a freeing of the imagination and a passionate encounter of the symbols of the powers we do not control and only dimly comprehend. Thar made sense to me.

Did you visit one of his services?

- Yes.

Didn't it include invocation of Christ and New Testament readings?

- I think so.

Then it spoke out of the Christian tradition. The purpose of worship is not an undifferentiated sense of the sacred but a Jewish expression of the sacred.

- You're going back to the worship-prayer distinctions we spoke about.

Yes. These distinctions are critical.

The dictionary defines prayer in terms of petition and entreaty. Most of us equate prayer with the sudden surge of emotion which comes over us when we are pushed beyond our resources or unable to contain our joys. I prayed when my father was deathly ill. I prayed when each of my children was born. Those prayers were spoken late at night in a hospital corridor and not in a synagogue. Prayer cannot be scheduled. To be sure, there have been times when I have prayed during a service. I came troubled. The music calmed my spirits. The sense of community, the quiet, an awareness of the presence of God unlocked my heart. But I can number these moments.

There is a petition in the service, but a Jewish service is not a prayer meeting. Open the Siddur and you will find praise, doctrine, paragraphs from the literature, The Sayings of the Fathers, a collection of proverbs from the Mishnah, memorial prayers. During Sabbath worship Torah is read. A sermon may be preached. Candles are lit. The Kaddish is recited. Those who say, 'I do not need to come to the synagogue to pray,' are absolutely right. Prayer is agnostic -- people pray to God, to gods, to mother, to the devil, to the winds. Jewish worship is mono-theistic. Prayer is spontaneous. Worship uses a text and is conducted largely in a holy language. Prayer pleads. Worship challenges. Prayer is a private expression. Worship is congregational. Worship requires a minyan, ten of the community. Worship is instructively Jewish, an attempt to marry the religious vision to the soul. Worship exists to lift us from the workaday world and to place us in the Torah world where we can breathe for a few moments the pure air of the vision and live for an hour within the beauty of the tradition. Worship creates an emotional environment in which the basic teachings can come alive for us because they have been turned into song and visualized in effective ritual.

Worship allows us to live in the spiritual order of the Jewish people. Wherever he finds himself, the Jew can find a service with which he will be familiar, feel rooted and at home.

- You've made your point, but I've still got a problem. I want to be genuine and during worship I am asked to read somebody else's words. At services I often think I am being transformed into a parrot. They give me a book, tell me to open to such and such a page and read. They expect me to feel religious precisely between 8:15 and 9:30 on Friday night. I always feel I'm being directed by some anonymous 'they'.

Spontaneity is not the consummate value. Prayer is spontaneous and being artless it can be foolish, petty, misdirected, or self-deluding. Men can and will pray as the spirit moves them. When we worship and use the classic poetry of the psalms or paragraphs sanctified by centuries of faith, we recognize that worship has the extra dimension of spiritual grace.

- Still a service seems artificial.

Worship is artificial in the sense that all civilization is artificial; that is, it is a creation of human design. The label, "creative service", is an unfortunate one for a service which tosses out centuries of classic literature for a few paragraphs written in haste. It also suggests that we cannot relate creatively to another's words. Would you say that Rubenstein or Heifetz are not creative musicians because they play scores written by Chopin and Beethoven? The pianist creates new music even as he recreates another's music. I've thought a lot about the twenty-third Psalm and written a piece on it, and I would insist that it belongs as much to me as to King David.

In prayer man speaks to God. In worship God, Torah, speaks to man. The Shema is not a philosophic definition but a revelation - the end and beginnirg of faith. The Torah is not an ancient teaching, but the presentation of God's word for us to consider. The Kaddish is not a prayer for the dead, but the faith that death is part of God's wisdom and an affirmation of the immortality of generations who struggled, suffered and served. Here is the sense of continuity, the compelling serse of command, the bonds that tie us to others who respond to the same deep memories and emotional needs we do.

Traditional worship is changed, minor-keyed, full of movement. A Jew davens, a

colloquialism which suggests a far more active posture than sitting in a pew. He loses himself in words which came from nearly every century of his people's life. The Siddur allows us to sing along with King David and Judah ha Levi. We remind ourselves of the martyrs whose sacrifice commands our loyalty and of the poets whose images inspire our thoughts. There is petition in the liturgy but also the reminder that "we do not know whether what we ask for is for our good." When we look carefully we notice that requests are phrased in the third person plural, 'we', not 'I'. What is asked for is the fulfillment of hopes we all share: health, a just social order, a return to Zion, the Messianic Age. "Grant us peace."

The central act of worship is the reading of Torah, but it is never left there. There is interpretation, an opening of our spirit to the meaning of God's words. At worship we signify a willingness at least to listen, really to listen, to the commands which holiness imposes. Here is our past, our mythic language, our becoming, the mysterious power of God's words still instructing us as He did our fathers at Sinai.

- You're being uncharacteristically romantic. When I go to my synagogue I tend to find the mood flat; and, instead of being lifted, I am let down.

I suspect we've all been let down by a service. I have been put off by a restless congregation, a posturing cantor and a service conducted off-handedly. Many who come to the synagogue come to honor a friend or a friend's child and not to honor God. They are in no mood to pay attention to the words or mood, and they send out unmistakable vibrations that they are not part of a worshipping congregation.

But, if I've been to services which failed to lift me out of myself, I've rarely been to a service which failed to bring me back to my Jewish self. Whatever was happening on the pulpit, I could always read my Siddur. The familiar symbols were there and almost always a familiar tune or two. I welcome the chance to touch base with my Jewish life. During the day I am a husband, a father, a professional, an American citizen; in the synagogue I am simply a Jew.

- You obviously look on worship as important. I've always thought of it as color. I can go or not go with little or no practical consequence.

Not so. Worship is one of the ways of strengthening the Jew in you; your childhood conditioning is reinforced. You're reminded of Torah themes you'd forgotten about.

Worship helps me answer the question which has bothered us so much: What is Judaism? In my studies I've got to deal with the almost infinite number of aspects which our river has exhibited. Worship synthesizes and selects and raises up the relevant major themes which are quietly affirmed. Worship presents basic Judaism. Complexity has been reduced to straight-forward sentences. Outside the synagogue a Jew answers a question with a question. The Siddur puts the question aside. Here are the affirmations. "True and firm, established and enduring, right and faithful, beloved and precious, desireable and pleasant. . . is this Thy word."

You've objected a bit to the repetitiveness of worship. I often think that, were worship not as familiar as it is, had not unconsciously memorized many of its paragraphs and taken to heart its melodies, Judaism could not have survived the end of social segregation. During worship, the teaching takes the wings of song and imbeds itself deep within our psyche, and we become Jews.

- Why are so many synagogue services pedestrian?

- I spent a semester in England at Cambridge University. Each college has a chapel and most have Evensong. It's quiet and candlelit. The Gothic arches and the shadows blend beautifully with the hymns. There's an unmistakable sense of sanctity.

- My synagogue is small and when people are in it it's noisy. I'd love a church's majesty.

I've attended Evensong at King's College, Cambridge, and been moved, but I also noticed the values that were expressed by the architecture. The fellows and students were in an inner space behind a screen. I was on the other side with the commaners. In the synagogue

there are no separations based on class or rank. The informality of the synagogue reflects Judaism's commitment to democracy.

- You've not answered my question.

I, too, want a service which catches me up in a sense of the divinity reaching out to me from behind the surface of life, from within the teachings of Torah and from deep within the history of the Jewish people. There must be song and feeling and the presence of Kedushah, holiness. Song which releases the spirit. Poetic language which touches the soul. The space should shut out the work-a-day world, a sense of what we would like the world to be like: warm-hearted folk, not cold-eyed people; chant, not cacaphony; worthwhile thoughts, not cruel ones; a sense of closeness to God.

Because we don't give them a chance. America's Jews tend to be generous, public spirited, socially aware and indifferent to worship. It's a routine sight in many congregations for parents to drop children off and go on to some other activity. By and large the pious stayed in Europe, and those who came were too busy seeking all the goodies available to offer to seek the intangibles which worship offers. They didn't need worship to celebrate life's possibilities. Moreover, the tradition had never threatened those who didn't worship with damnation. It's changing. Services are better attended. The times are darker and more concerned with spirit and soul.

- You have described one of worship's functions as celebrating life's possibilities. Go on a bit.

A community visualizes, symbolizes, its redemptive gospel in ritual and worship. In all religious communities such moments provide a foretaste of Paradise or of Heaven on earth and remind the communicant of how he must live to qualify for the Kingdom. Appropriate music is heard. A preacher reads from God's word and discusses what we must do to be worthy. There are reminders of high duties and fundamental obligations, the ways we can help build the Kingdom. People are dressed up and on their best behavior, as if they were already angels. Work

clothes are deliberately excluded. Here is a foretaste of what life can be when we create the just society on earth or enter the heavenly Jerusalem: golden words, glorious themes, and a grand vision; a symbolic confirmation of the fact that the redemptive promise is real. To participate is to be caught up in the moment and to be encouraged. Many of the themes are Messianic. Generally we grow through such an experience but we are not transformed into saints. No one knows better than those who take a religious tradition with utmost seriousness how far short we fall of our private expectations and, at the same time, how important the religious forms are in strengthening our will and sensitizing our spirit to a whole range of obligations and possibilities.

- I can buy worship as an opportunity to live as a Jew and as a celebration of life's possibilities, but I can't buy the darker side of worship. All that sin talk. The idea of confession. It's too heavy. The world gives me enough stress without the synagogue adding to my distress.

- The phrase, "we have done perversely," has always stuck in my craw. I'm not perverse. Why does the Yom Kippur worship lay such guilt-ridden terms on us? Guilt inhibits. There's already too much guilt in the world. Most sins are society's fault.

How would you organize a service around the theme of conduct?

- Yom Kippur ought to be a grand celebration of the possibilities of life. The liturgy should speak of expectation and hope. Let bygones be bygones. In any case, no one is guilty. We do what we do because of our environment, our conditioning, because our families raised us in a certain way. There are no bad children, only bad living conditions and careless parents.

I always think of Yom Kippur as a grand celebration of possibility, and it's the worship's emphasis on sin and confession which makes it so. Sin implies possibility.

The concept of sin reminds me that I am morally responsible for talents untapped, sensitivities unused, and responsibilities unmet. Have you ever read B. F. Skinner?

- Yes. He's the psychologist who believes that we can become only what our genetic

endowment and our environment allows us to be. I agree with him.

Skinner holds that frustration and failure prevent us from fulfilling our potential. The goal, then, is to eliminate failure in the educational process. Skinner proposes to do so by a mechanical environment, a learning machine, which would provide the child all the information needed to put ideas together so as to form new ideas, to learn, without ever facing the frustration of knocking his head against a wall. Skinner's device was designed to insure that mistakes would not occur and to instantly acknowledge a correct judgment. Presumedly, the student would learn without frustration; no guilt, no mental or emotional block.

Skinner's box was based on a theory of some merit which insists that the environment in which we live substantially affects how we live, what we can accomplish, the questions we ask, and the answers we arrive at. We tend to think of ourselves as if we are autonomous beings when, in fact, we are in rather significant ways what our parents and our society have allowed us to become. Conditioning determines much about us. The fact that we speak English, for instance, means that some ideas can be expressed easily and others perhaps not at all. Our habits are American-bred and, therefore, we think of ourselves differently than an Indian villager or a Japanese worker thinks of himself.

- These ideas are not particularly new.

Skinner's popularity lay in the fact that he begins with a suprising value judgment: that the impact of Western civilization on the individual is destructive precisely because it suggests that we are free. Encouraged in belief that we are autonomous, we have come to expect that we can, by the exercise of will and determination, modify our behavior. This idea, according to Skinner, is wrong and can create paralyzing frustration. He particularly blamed the Western religions for emphasizing individual responsibility. He argued that we do not fail because, in fact, we are not responsible for what we do; our environment is.

- I like the idea of no sin.

Many do. That's why Skinner's ideas were popular. No one likes to shoulder responsibility

We're quite ready to argue that the triviality of our lives is not our fault but the fault of our parents or of environment. Skinner's arguments set well with a socially aware but undisciplined age; an age which doesn't like sin talk.

Environment does play a role in our lives, and so do a number of special factors such as age and mental competence. The Midrash explains God's decision to have the whole generation of onetime slaves die in the wilderness as a result of His recognition that their spirit had been broken and that they lacked the initiative and drive pioneers require. But the whole ethos of the Torah tradition cries out: "they (the commandments) are not too hard for you." Choose. You are responsible for your actions and your character. God did not fashion us as robots but as conscious creatures, capable of thinking through the consequences of our actions and ultimately capable of acting on our decisions. Skinner is simply and vitally wrong. We do have a measure of freedom and the inner resources to use our freedom wisely.

- But we're not completely free. I'm color-blind. I couldn't be a painter if my life depended on it.

The crux of this debate is not on whether there are special factors but whether we shape what is given us. I think we do. The Torah says we can. Children raised in good homes with parents who care for them and correct them have a better chance of developing a coherent sense of self than a street child who is raised carelessly, perhaps cruelly; but environment is not all. Some raised in good homes become bums. Some who are raised on the street become saints.

In life everything, including freedom, has limits, but the grandeur of the Torah tradition is that it insists that we act in the area of moral judgment as if these boundaries did not exist. We have been given by God the artist's gift of dominating the material before us, and the more trained and disciplined we become the greater our freedom of action. Animals are ruled by instinct; behaviorists like Skinner liken man to an animal. God made the animals, each according to its kind. An animal remains what he was born. The Torah says man was made differently. "Then God said, 'let us make man in our image and likeness'." Animals do not

reason. The human animal can become a human being.

- Well and good, but why lay on guilt? We were talking about Yom Kippur.

Sin measures potential. I don't sin. If I could act in any other way, morality would imply that I could not be other than I am, and that's a dismal thought. It's only when I cease to feel that I can change or grow that the world becomes a gray and hapless place. The sense of sin forces me to consider the more I can do and must do and will do; and it's that "can" and that "must" and that "will" out of which progress, a better future and maturity, a better self, will be formed. Sin says I'm responsible and that's always an encouraging thought.

- But sin is such a heavy thought.

Not all that heavy. When I leave the synagogue after the closing service of Yom Kippur, I walk taller than I did the night before. As I confessed my sins I recognized I wasn't shackled to them.

- But you never get out from under.

We're human, not models. I hope you have noticed that the Torah's special message focuses on growth not purity. Judaism is a way to become a more competent human rather than a way to escape our humanity.

- But what about guilt?

What about it? As with all things in life, there's healthy guilt, a prodding conscience, and morbid guilt, a grovelling in abjectness. The fact that some people can't handle responsibility is no reason to deny the responsibility of those who can.

I couldn't resist closing the session with a miniature Yom Kippur sermon. In many ways the absence of a strong sense of moral responsibility is the classic sin of our age. Everybody is more comfortable with compromise. Everybody wants to do his thing. Nobody wants to be a whistle-blower. People close their ears to cries of help and refuse to testify to a crime. Contrast this shoddy reluctance with God's straightforward and bracing demands: "See, I have set before you this day, life and death, the blessing and the curse, choose life. Cease to do evil. Learn to do well."