MS-4850: Daniel Jeremy Silver Papers, 1972-1993.
Series 4: Writings and Publications, 1952-1992, undated.
Sub-series A: Books, 1961-1990, undated.

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Come On In, the Water's Fine, unpublished manuscript, second draft, chapters 1-6, pages 1-145, undated.

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

Introduction

TOWARDS A PHILOSOPHY OF JEWISH SURVIVAL

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

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

Such reasoning may satisfy a fifty-year old who has enjoyed his Jewish experience and has come to terms with himself, but it cannot satisfy a restless eighteen-year old who is eager to discover for himself who he is and what life is all about. At eighteen or twenty

no one wants to settle for the life of his parents. A young adult wants the best, not just the familiar. He wants to try the high road, not follow a level and often trod path. There are so many places to go and experiences to savor. My two-word response turned into a week-long conversation which ranged over theology, philosophy, politics, the institutions of Jewish life, ethics and the realities of being a Jew in a convulsed world.

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

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

interested in the problem to which we kept returning: why be a Jew?

In preparation for the Institute I had reviewed some theoretical material on identity which I had prepared for a symposium I had organized for my rabbinic association some months before. In the course of these studies I had come to certain convictions about how to approach the identity problem. These obviously influenced all I said and I think it is wise to put them down here, up front, as the saying goes.

Self-awareness is a mixed blessing. The child is comfortable as he is; the adult talks nervously of a need to find himself. In the ancient world where change occurred at a snail's pace, philosophers taught that nothing new appears under the sun; and most folk agreed. History's sign was a serpent with its head in its mouth. People knew who they were, where they fitted into their community, and what values and skills to teach their children. Classic literature like the Bible or Homer's epics was generally written in the third person and described wars and adventures rather than an individual's interior life. A settled society focuses its imagination on events rather than in emotions.

Our ancestors rarely questioned the fitness of the familiar ways and customs of their community. David or Odysseus struggled to do his duty rather than to know himself. Personal feelings were not special enough to be interesting. Our world is a quite different place. Ties that they took for granted have become for us problematic. Our literature tends to be an exploration of private feelings. We are keenly aware of our individuality, less likely to be submissive to authority and more likely to be anxious about ourselves.

A Jew was a Jew and that was the whole of it. The outside world knew them to be Jews. Their domestic world provided a tightly woven web of custom and commandments which shaped their routines, gave a

particular color to their personalities, and provided the structure of a close-knit communal life. Education was parochial. Relationships were regulated by religious tradition. You were married under a huppah. When a son was born there was a bris. When a parent died you sat shivah. Belonging to the Jewish people was not only a fact of life but the determinative fact of their lives; not only inevitable but proclaimed a blessing. They accepted the myth that God had declared Israel an am-segulah, a people especially beloved to Him, and had given them a central role in His plans for the world.

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

A word about my use of the term myth. I use it to describe a story that is among the precious possessions of a society because it explains the mysteries and meaning of life. A myth is true because it is believed and believed to be significant. Philosophy dissects truth through analysis. Myths express the truths which defy analysis and so provide a culture a uniquely appropriate way to express dynamic truths. Myth animates truth and so is a uniquely effective vehicle to express assumptions about value, wisdom and purpose.

Since they were confident that they knew God's instructions and that these were, in fact, the familiar norms of their world, Jews rarely wondered whether they should remain part of the community of Israel. Except under duress no one deliberately takes the wrong road. If their role included special and demanding obligations, these were accepted as proof that God really cared! One of the ways parents show children that they care is by being strict with them. God cared for Israel.

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

Our situation is quite other. There are bridges across the religious divide. We share the privilege of citizenship in a pluralistic society. The old rhetoric can still be heard, 'only if you join us will you be saved,' or 'God doesn't hear the prayers of Jews'; but most folk, certainly most Jews, think of other religions as complementary ways to spiritual growth. There is a social comity in our communities which the medieval Jew did not enjoy and probably could not have imagined. The identity issue was once a purely political issue. Today the question of principle is a primary one. The self-confident and self-validating assumptions with which rabbinic culture insulated the Jew and with which

Church teachings isolated the Christian are no longer accepted uncritically; indeed, they are daily brought into question by the freedom of our social lives. Children of all faiths mix and mingle in school, sports, and society. Lifelong affiliation is no longer inevitable or necessarily applauded. As he grows up, almost every young person will ask at some point, 'why remain a . . .'

We assumed in our discussions our immediate environment. In the Islamic world social and religious conditions remain as parochial as they were in medieval Europe. Those few Jews who remain in places like Morocco and Tunisia exist on tolerance and are subject to a wide variety of social restrictions. Their Jewish identity is inescapable. In the Soviet Union where 'Jew' is passport designation, atheism a dogma of the party, and Zionism a crime, government policy focuses the identity issue; Jews do not have the freedom to carry another passport nor the freedom to learn and practice Judaism. In Israel, the identity problem is also quite different in nature. A young Israeli speaks Hebrew, learns Jewish history in school, never worries that the Hebrew University will schedule registration on Yom Kippur and lives under political tensions which create a considerable distance and suspicion between him and his Arab neighbors.

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

At first they spoke as if their identity decisions represented entirely private commitments without social or family consequence. We like to think of ourselves as autonomous and self-reliant. I argued throughout, I hope perseusively, that questions of identity cannot be

disentangled from political or social considerations. A non-observant Jew or a Jew who practices TM, or even one who converts to Christianity, may find, to his surprise, that he continues to be seen as a Jew by friends, neighbors and employers. Even in the aftermath of World War II when evidence of the Holocaust shocked many non-Jews into a recognition of their participation in genteel prejudice, being Jewish was rarely allowed to be a matter purely of private conscience. Certainly it is not now as memories of the Holocaust dim and questions of ethnic and religious quotas are debated across the land. I've yet to meet a college admissions officer who couldn't tell me how many Jews there are in an entering class or a senior executive who didn't know which of his top assistants was Jewish.

The question, 'why be a Jew', can be treated with theoretical detachment only by those to whom the question is not an immediate one and their theorizing is likely to be more intellectually then personally satisfying. Religious decisions are existential decisions which grow out of private needs, not analytic decisions which grow out of the force of conceptual analysis, so I have tried to deal with the questions they raised out of the context of their lives rather then to present a systematic outline and defense of basic Judaism. I believe Judaism to be a helpful, and I would even say inspired, tradition, but I've never met anyone who became a more envolved and active Jew because someone successfully debated the tradition's comperative merit.

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

In terms of pure logic, there is no unassailable rationale of

Jewish survival, and I would insist that a similar dismissing statement can be made of each and every religious tradition. There is no totally convincing argument why a Jew ought to remain a Jew; or, a Christian a Christian or a Communist a Communist. Survival is a given, not a demonstrable argument. Life establishes its own right to be. On the most elemental level, I am because I am. I have an inalienable right to be what I am or wish to be. The Jewish people is because Jews are.

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

Jews gave Europe and Civilization its Bible and its vision of social justice. Islam derived its uniterian theology and its patterns of worship from the Torah tradition. In the twelfth century Jews translated much of the literary and philosophic legacy of Greece from Arabic and Syrian into the languages of Europe. In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries Jews taught Protestant Europe to read the Bible in its original Hebrew and to value the careful study of Scripture. In the nineteenth century Jewish social thought stimulated many of the political reformers who set about establishing a classless social order. This small community has been remarkably creative, but abstract discussions of Jewish contributions to civilization, however historically interesting,

are not personally compelling.

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

Many were troubled by the seeming lack of initiative involved in continuing in inherited ways. I found myself often repeating the obvious: that what is different is not necessarily more distinguished and that, in any case, we cannot jump out of our souls. In determining the future, talents and force of will are important, but, to a surprising degree, we become what we become because of the place in which we find ourselves and the influences which bear upon us. I am what I am because of my family, because of the schooling that was available to me, because of the social context in which I grew up and now live, because I had a Jewish home and a Jewish education. I am not a carbon copy of my parents. Part of my identity is a given, but my mature identity is an achievement. As I took these experiences into myself and tried to understand them I found that I was not only encouraged to be part of a long-lived, historic and courageous people, but that my life had taken on a satisfying shape and that I had gained a sense of purpose and confidence in my purposes. So I have concluded that the value of Judaism for the individual and the reason for the survival of the Jewish people is that it allows us to shape our lives within a grand, rich and wise religious civilization. How do I know? I know.

I believe in the far mystery. I believe that the survival of the Jewish people is of consequence to the world. I believe that God

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

I do not know how the tomorrows of Jewish history will affect the world, but I know that our past has ennobled many. I believe that because of my exposure to this people, its sacrifices and its heroism; and because of my exposure to this tradition, its wisdom and its humanity, I have been helped to grow into a sensitive and responsible human being. I cannot but believe that a tradition whose effects can be so beneficial can and will continue to make important contributions to the unfolding of the human spirit.

What follows is not theology but some suggestions how the question, 'why be a Jew', can be usefully approached. Since I believe that Judaism is best defined as a living, developing tradition, as the religious civilization of the Jewish people, rather than as a formal doctrine or a revealed and unchanging legislation, I have not attempted to develop Jewish affirmations systematically. Indeed, I'm not sure, given the variety of approaches and ideas which have been espoused by Jews over the millenia that any fully satisfactory presentation of the essence of Judaism can be made. These pages present a way of thinking about being Jewish and about becoming an active Jew which, I hope, has the value of being honest, fresh and suggestive.

Chapter 1

DOING WHAT DOMES NATURALLY

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

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

- A voice cut in from the lawn. If I ever need a religion I'll find one that's good for me. Until then I'll reserve judgment.

I gave up. You can't acquire a religion by going shopping one day and picking off the rack a religious garment which happens to catch your eye. Religion involves what we are deep inside, not what we wear; you can't decide in the morning what religion you'll wear that day.

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

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

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

Did you see a Jean Truffaut film called <u>The Wild Child</u>? About a century ago in France a boy was abandoned by his parents and raised by

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

- But that's a movie.

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

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

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

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

- It was still I've got to make my statement time. Another voice cut in: I read about those prayer breakfasts where senators, businessmen, and generals begin the day with bowed heads and then spend the rest of the day manipulating the levers of power. Aren't they a bunch

of hypocrites?

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

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

for our times. Each has been taught by his tradition that realistic prudence as well as prophetic commitment are required of human beings, at least as long as the world remains unredeemed.

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

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

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

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

We did not choose to be born. We will die not by choice or, if we die naturally, at a time of our choosing. Life is not only brief but confusing. We cannot prove that one way of life is better than another or that the goals we have formulated are worthwhile or attainable, yet, such is our constitution, that we need to believe that what we do is right and that our commitments have been intelligently chosen

and that their effect will be consequential. We need to find life an ennobling and exciting experience rather than a bitter life sentence without hope of parole. To do so, we need to resolve the contradictions of our existence, which is to say we need a religion. Every society has, or has had, a religious component for the good reason that no group can function successfully unless it is satisfied that its energies are directed meaningfully, that its values are valid and that its efforts will be rewarded. The religious need is as natural and as necessary as the need to love and be loved. Religions exist because we cannot manage without them.

Animals respond out of instinct to their environment and consequently lack this religious need. They struggle to survive as we do but they are not blessed, or is it cursed, by curiosity. They do not wonder why and never doubt they are going about it in the right way. Alone among animate creatures, the human is aware of being alive and conscious that life is full of contradictions and options; all too brief and often terribly bruising. We cannot help wondering what life is and what death is and whether there is any purpose to all our exertions. Nor can we help wondering whether we know what is right and what we can or should do to make our world a better place.

Apparently we can tolerate any thought except the possibility that life is chaotic and aimless. We cannot survive, certainly not sanely or successfully, caught in a web of paralysing doubt. Something in each of us reaches out to appropriate hope and meaning. Psychologists speak of a will to believe as one of the built-in primitives of our emotional apparatus. We need to feel that there is a way that we ought to go, a way which will give meaning and grace to what would otherwise be a hapless journey. On the High Holidays we read a portion of the book of Deuteronomy which includes the imperative: "Choose life." Someone once said to me, why make such a todo about the inevitable? We have

no other choice. Actually, have we any choice? Yes, we do. Being alive is not the same as feeling alive. Without hope and a vision, a religion, each day is a burden. Caught up in a vision each day is an opportunity. Religion allows the human being to experience life as a challenging journey rather than a joyless endurance contest. I could give you a number of sophisticated definitions of religion; but perhaps it's easiest to simply quote Salvador de Madriaga: "religion is all that we do to prove to ourselves that God is not mad."

- I thought religions told us how to qualify for life in the hereafter. You focus religion on the here and now.

Religions represent the insights, symbols, rituals and ethical principles by which a society confirms a certain order and affirms a particular hope. Immortality is only one possible form of the preferred hope. Religious hope is often called redemption and the promise can take many forms: long life, health and wealth, the lasting significance of your labors, a messiah, a messianic age, peace of mind, triumph over enemies, Aryan conquest, the victory of the proletariat. The various religions hold out a variety of promises; but, if we look not at the particular gospel but at the emotional need all such hopes satisfy, it becomes apparent that to be redeemed means simply to feel that your values are confirmed, your efforts significant, and that your influence will have some lasting value.

- You're speaking of individual hopes. How does a private vision become a religion with millions of members?

We are by nature social beings. The sense of assurance, the vision, may begin with one man: an Abraham, a Paul, a Mohammed; but, inevitably, others are caught up in it, and a religion emerges. In many ways the experience of finding ourselves is really the search for a satisfying religion.

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

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

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

I'm sure that you believe in democracy and justice. You believe that our world can be made a better place. You think you can shape your life and find fulfillment. These are common enough convictions. On what basis do you hold them?

- They're right.

How do you know?

- Everyone agrees.

Not so. In China the individual is taught to subordinate his ego

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

Any cultural tradition which confirms a social vision is a religious tradition and is redemptive in the sense that it affirms the meaningfulness of life. Notice I said, "Any cultural tradition." Not all religious visions are sensitive or healthy. As in every other aspect of life, one must learn to be discriminating in matters religious. Every religion consecrates a particular set of actions which it declares to be necessary if redemption is to be realized. Some religions promulgate their views by example, others by coercion. Some traditions go out aggressively to convert the "unenlightened". Others approve actions which restrict the rights of non-believers. Puritanical attempts to enforce Sunday Blue Laws or denominational pressures to re-introduce prayer into the public schools are cases in point. In matters religious, as in most other aspects of life, the old adage applies: 'by their deeds shall you know them.'

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

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

- Define your terms.

Ethics are the norms by which we manage our day-to-day relations as honorably as we can. Ethics deals with right and wrong in contextual terms. It asks pragmatic questions about practical benefits. A religion's understanding of redemption may include the recurrence of ethical behavior, but it also envolves beliefs and loyalties which transcend moral behavior. Godliness and goodness are not synonymous terms. A hermit may do nothing but fast and pray. His culture may call him a holy man; but an ethicist may wonder if he is not simply a deserter from the real problems of his society.

If religion were simply a collection of ethical propositions its teachings would resemble a civics lesson rather than the rich complex of redemptive themes that are included in such documents as the Torah or the New Testament. There are other differences. Ethical standards tend to be situational. Religion raises up norms which are unconditioned. When we try on purely logical grounds to decide what is right we soon recognize, if we are honest with ourselves, that our judgments reflect a particular cultural context; and probably a good bit of self-serving rationalization, as well. Religion resolves our basic doubts about moral standards precisely because it teaches us that "right" actions conform to an ultimate standard. The familiar image of God, the Holy One, revealing the law to Moses is, among other things, a metaphor of this idea. When God speaks the believer feels that His commandments define right and wrong and are beyond question and unconditional. "It has been told you, O man, what is good and what the Lord requires of you" (Micah). It must be added that in a secular religion like Communism one's duties to the party are as absolute as if they derived from revelation.

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

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

- All religions do good. Judaism and Christianity teach many similar values. Why do you make an issue of religious differences?

Judgments must be made. Each religious culture shapes its communicants' ideas about right and wrong. Rabbinic Judaism insisted that suicide is wrong. God gave us life and He alone should determine its limits. In Shinto ritual suicide, hari-kari, is considered a virtue since a life without honor is no life. Let me ask a question: do all religions encourage those values we instinctively label as ethically valid: love, honesty, family loyalty, and social justice?

- Yes.

- No.

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

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

Why not?

- It was evil.

Must religions be good?

- Yes.

Why?

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

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

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

Wouldn't that include the Nazis?

- Someone who is affiliated with a congregation.

Couldn't you call the Nazi Party a congregation?

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

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

Aren't you assuming that the unaffiliated are, by definition, non-religious? Affiliation is largely a Western practice. In India people go when they wish to any available Hindu, Buddhist or Taoist shrine, and the temples are supported by coins tossed by the worshippers into a box placed in front of the idol.

- Do you mean that these religions are interchangeable?

At the peasant level the promise of a religious tradition is

reduced to its simplest level: rain, sons, health and immortality, and all the religions of a particular area refract similar social and cultural attitudes. It's only as civilization becomes more complex that significant differences in the religious message appear. In the literate circles of Asia, religious identification is a more formal affair and a Hindu Brahmin and a Taoist priest will be conscious of differences.

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

Here, by the way, is a partial explanation of the paradox that many of the founding fathers of the State of Israel who spent their lives creating a Jewish national home would not enter a synagogue. The hard lives and poverty of the families in Europe had turned them into doctrinaire socialists who looked on Judaism as an impediment to raising the consciousness of the Jewish proletariat. They wanted the workers to change their objective political situation by direct action rather than to be patient until God would send the Messiah; yet, their up-bringing, and the anti-semitism of Europe's Christian radicals, again an interesting juxtaposition of terms, channeled their energies into an activist version of the age-old messianic dream of the religion they disparaged.

But that world doesn't exist any more. Judaism is only one facet

of my life. I don't see Jewishness very much outside the synagogue.

Our society is a pluralistic one, one of the first and the few that the world has ever known. The traditional religions no longer permeate and dominate the culture. But I would still argue that religion permeates our lives. I would argue that religious values and visions affect us in all aspects of our lives. I would not argue that Jewish religious values are the only ones which affect most American Jews or that Christian religious values are the only ones which affect most Christians, even the born again. I suspect that all of us are deeply affected by America's civil religion.

- What's a civil religion?

When writers describe a civil religion, they mean a set of ethical rules and a utopian vision which enjoy widespread agreement among the citizens of a nation, ideas and hopes which are affirmed and celebrated by that nation's institutions and holidays. Civil religions are modern phenomena. As long as there was an official state-church, the church lifted up both national as well as theological values. With disestablishment of the church and the growth of secularism, the civil life began to take on religious aspects and to refract what can only be called religious values. The law will refract shared assumptions about human nature and broad purpose and these in turn will inform all public debate and the school curriculum and be sanctified in national holidays and anthems.

- Why?

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

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Observers have described America's civil religion as a secular humanism which affirms social justice; the autonomous individual, the Bill of Rights, public welfare, the work ethic and human brotherhood. Honesty compels me to add that this cluster of ideas and institutions also includes intense individualism, happiness through having, and a goodly amount of chauvinism. America's civil religion provides all the necessary elements of a religious faith: a promise of the future, a sense of common purpose, and a social and personal ethic. Instead of Micah's synthesis of the Biblical tradition I have cited, this faith's watch-word is President Kennedy's famous motto: "Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country. . ." Its commandments are those of social service. Its holidays are the Fourth of July, the second Tuesday in November, and Thanksgiving Day. Its symbols are the flag and the ballot and its liturgy includes the Pledge of Allegience. Its messianic vision is of a humane republic, secure in peace and established in justice. Not every American who is unchurched belongs to this tradition; in our heterogeneous society there are a number of racial and ethnic sub-cultures which build walls against these ideas; and counter-culture groups who hold to their own distinct visions and consciously espouse an anti-civil religion. Every religion has its dissenters and heretics and America's civil religion is no exception.

- How can one be a Jew and a civil religionist, if there is such a word, at the same time? I thought that in such matters it was one religion to a customer.

Because many of the major promises and premises of America's civil religion are, after all, the creation of people whose roots rested in the soil of Biblical civilization, these seemed quite acceptable to the less doctrinaire among America's Christians and Jews. There was no sense of enforced apostasy, but rather a sense of finding in the civil

religion a secular version of the older faith.

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

- I can understand civil religion because I see its ceremonies and concepts in my life. The national anthem before a sports event. Thanksgiving and the Fourth of July. The terms of our political debates. What I don't see is Judaism's message. A few candles and the holidays , but what else is there. I know I'm an American, but how am I a Jew?

In more ways than you're aware of. The religious imprint is, like indelible ink, almost impossible to erase and, under certain conditions, strikingly visible. The importance of education to the Jew is a case in point. The Jew may never read a Jewish classic, but college is a must. One of the hardest counseling tasks a rabbi can have is when he tries to convince parents that their child is not college material and ought to learn a trade. Judaism has conditioned all of us in many ways. I know that's not a fully satisfactory answer, but I promise you we'll come back to the question. It's central to our whole worth.

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- You have said that there are no irreligious people, but I've got a friend who is an atheist.

Atheism involves unprovable convictions and, at least in that sense, atheism is his religion. I suspect that he has converted to America's civil religion without being conscious of his act. Certainly he remains enmeshed in a set of religious values and hopes.

- Where is God in the civil religion? I've always assumed you don't have a religion if you don't have a god.

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

- Communism is anti-religious. How can you call it a religion?

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

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

Dictionaries reflect their times. If you had picked up an earlier edition you would have found religion defined as faith in the Christ, which is the way the first European dictionaries reflected the parochial self-confidence of medieval Christendom. Because Christianity taught that it replaced Judaism as God's chosen vehicle, Judaism was sometimes

accorded in these dictionaries the status of a fossil religion. As the West came to recognize that it did not represent the whole of human culture, the list of religions was enlarged to include Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism and the Chinese traditions. When Western scholars began to study the texts of Theravada Buddhism and the Confucian classics they perforce recognized that they had listed as religions traditions which did not insist on faith in a personal god or gods. By the late nineteenth century dictionaries began to broaden their definition: "A way of life in accord with authorized teachings" or "faith that the truth is known."

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

- Aren't a lot of Israelies anti-religious? Our cousins visited us recently. We invited them to go to services with us. They made it clear that they weren't interested. They hadn't been in a synagogue since they left Europe thirty years ago.

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

root the national calender and language in a distant and romantic past.

- Defining religion is getting complicated.

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

Sometimes I simply describe religion as that cluster of ideas and hopes which we couldn't give up without changing what's in our souls.

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

When an idea is hotly defended you can be pretty sure it's part of that person's religious system. Our dependence on a religious system whose teachings and symbols confirm our sense of order is decisive in maintaining our composure and balance in the face of life's challenges. Any challenge to these assumptions threatens our soul.

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

The question was rhetorical. The camp loudspeaker crackled with a call to sports. I asked them to think over a paragraph from George

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Santayana's Reason in Religion: "Every living and healthy religion has a marked idiosyncracy. Its power consists in its special and surprising message and in the bias which that revelation gives to life. The vistas it opens and the mysteries it propounds are another world to live in - whether we expect ever to pass wholly over into it or no - is what we mean by having a religion." Let's talk more after lunch about the fact that religions perform the same functions in all societies, but are substantively quite distinct.

- Do you mean that Judaism and America's civil religion are not as closely allied as I tend to think?

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

Chapter 2

MY FAITH AND OUR RELIGION

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

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

They already have. No one lives solo. You speak and think in English. Your attitudes have been shaped by the mass media, suburbia, what you have read, the conventional wisdom and your home. No one starts a religious search with an unprogrammed mind. You become an "I" only when you accept your conditioning and transcend it much as a great artist masters the disciplines of his medium in order to use them to express his vision. The parent who keeps his child out of religious school and keeps ritual out of the home so the child will be free later to make up his mind denies him the opportunity to experience easily and naturally the warmth and encouragement of a religious tradition; and, since youth is thirsty for the sense of high purpose and bracing moral challenge that religion provides, his child will probably search for a substitute for what he is denied, and may latch onto a teaching that cannot provide the sensitivity and balance of a main line tradition.

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

hedonist culture whose values are consecrated on the television they watch every Sabbath morning and most other times.

- I'm puzzled by all this talk of environment and community. I was taught that religion was what a person does with his soliteriness and the idea made sense to me.

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

The distinction between faith and religion is important because it allows us to understand how a Jew, a Christian, a Muslim may each have faith in a personal god, but will inevitably express their faith in distinct ways, how it happens that the consequences of their faith for their lives will be quite distinct. Faith,inevitably, is colored by and refracted through a religion. In building a faith we drew on our religious tradition. Faith emerges from religion as the English scientist-author put it: "One cannot invent a religion."

- What then is religious experience?

It's a binding experience, a reaching out to something apprehended but not yet comprehended, during which the religion ceases to be out there somewhere and becomes part of us. Early in this century a German scholar, Rudolph Otto, described the sense of coming alive to one's religion as a response to ultimate reality, a sense of touching and being deeply affected by a reality beyond what is known in everyday

experience. Otto used the term numinous for the emotional aura which surrounds the moment when the mysterious reality which lies beyond the world of common experience. Otto, a non-Jew, found the numinous present on various occasions, including a Yom Kippur service in a small North African synagogue. The worshippers were in white. The chant was minor-keyed and repetitive. The congregation moved with an hypnotic sway which swept the worshippers out of themselves and clearly took them beyond ordinary feelings and thoughts.

I am sure others have sensed the numinous in a May Day parade or a Nuremberg Rally or an African tribal dance. In each case the moment was special and the music and ritual distinctive; emotions flowed and the participants felt confirmed and consecrated. Jews use the term Kedusha, holiness, to describe out special perception of the numinous.

- I have trouble associating holiness with the elation of young Communists on Red Square on May Day.

I do, too, but I do not doubt that Ivan can have a religious high, a numinous experience, which confirms all that has been taught him about duty and the future. The fact that you can say 'I believe' does not validate what you believe in.

Over time each religion conditions its communicants to associate certain values with their confirming experiences. Kedusha is both the general sense of that reality which stands beyond, behind and within the world of ordinary experiences and a particular sense of the nature of that reality - for the Jewish tradition this meant a particular sense of the nature of God. Early in his career the prophet Isaiah entered the Temple in Jerusalem, felt the inrush of a quickening spirit, God's spirit, and spoke spontaneously, "Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord of Hosts, the whole earth is full of His glory", words which, enshrined in the daily liturgy, have become for Jews the prototype for all numinous experiences.

- They were not yet ready to discuss theology. Religion's public nature was still a troubling idea. Why must my faith involve synagogues and public rites? The fact that the religious life has included tribal dances, the procession of images and congregational worship doesn't mean that it can't stop. Haven't we progressed beyond needing these crutches?

Why does it bother you so much?

Because once institutions emerge, coercion is inevitable. Religions have crusades, inquisitions, and censorship to their discredit.

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

- Because religions claim to teach truth and define right and duty. Unfortunately synagogues can be snobbish and class conscious, and rabbis aren't saints.

You're quoting Jeremiah perhaps without knowing it. "From the smallest to the greatest, they are all greedy for gain: priests and prophet alike, they all act falsely." Congregations are made up of fallible people like ourselves and operate in the confusing world which is where we live. Rabbis are people and subject to all the infirmities of the spirit. A dream can be clean and free of compromise, but reality is dusty and full of gentle and not so gentle contradictions.

Judaism has never claimed that its institutions and leaders were

free of error or beyond reproach. The synagogue is an entirely human institution. It is one thing to celebrate God and encourage the search for meaning and quite another to demand that unquestioned loyalty be shown to any religious institution or leader.

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

The theology's in place. Ultimate truth belongs to God alone. We believe, but, when all is said and done, we cannot be sure. An old teacher of mine used to say: "Our ability to do justice and love mercy will often depend on how well we have learned to walk humbly with our God." The Torah takes pains to drive home the point: "My ways are not your ways, says the Lord; and my thoughts are not your thoughts. Just as the heavens are holier than the earth, so are my thoughts higher than your thoughts." Somehow we must marry patience to principle; it's not easy, but the problem is not the institutionalization of religion, which is in any case necessary and inevitable, but our blindness to the inevitability of human fallibility. Faith inevitably tends towards fanaticism.

-- Don't institutions compound a religion's ability to cause pain?

A group can do more harm than the single person.

And more good. When we think about religion only in visionary terms, no realistic thinking about the development of social justice programs and no effective planning for the development of the skills of spiritual growth is possible. You need organization to establish schools, synagogues, libraries, retreats, welfare service, self-help agencies, and the like.

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

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

- What about the Temple in Jerusalem?

The Temple had a Holy of Holies which only the High Priest would enter and various courtyards reserved for various elite groups among which the priest class was preeminent. It was accorded special veneration and was the goal of pilgrims. The Temple service was organized by priests. No ordinary Israelite could perform at the alter. But once the Temple was destroyed the Jewish tradition broke out of the almost universal pattern of shrine worship of the ancient Middle East and created a brand new, never before seen, institution - the synagogue. Actually the seeds of this change had been incubating for centuries in the informal

community centers which Jews organized wherever they lived, where holiday and Sabbath prayers were sung, the Torah read and discussed and community business debated.

The first rabbis turned these proto-synagogues into sanctuaries by ruling that such rituals as the blowing of the Shofar and the handling of the lulav and ethrog, once limited to the Temple, could, now that the Temple had been destroyed, be observed in the synagogue. However, they did not allow the synagogue to become a place which sanctified privilege. Anyone could enter, anyone, at least any male, conduct services. The synagogue is a meeting house rather than a cathedral, a place where the individual counts. Nine rabbis do not make a minyan. Ten laborers do.

- But why are religious folk so difficult to deal with? I tried the other day to talk with a fundamentalist friend about Darwin and the theory of Evolution and it was like talking to a stone wall. Though it was clear he didn't fully understand them, he dismissed Darwin's unproved theories. Genesis I was the inerrant word of God.

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

Let me illustrate this point from Jewish history. Imagine a Martian, one who is not like us, come among us. Imagine that sometime during his visit he reads a history of Europe's Jews. Surely, he would

shake his head sadly over the long chronicle of people penned into ghettoes, made to wear badges which declared them as perishs, and repeatedly beaten and massacred by Crusader and Cossack. I might also wonder, if I were this Martian, why these Jews didn't simply accept baptism and get out from under. Wouldn't mass conversion have been the sensible thing to do? Holy water cannot drown the soul and since no one can look into another's soul and Jews would have survived, gained security and bettered themselves economically at the same time that they continued to believe whatever they wanted to believe.

- Our Martian friend had better be told about the Inquisition.

Right, some Jews did think like our friend; but, in many people's minds, once a Jew always a Jew. Those who converted were segregated out as New Christians and for generations their actions and faith were subjected to constant scrutiny by the Inquisition and their families were subjected to various forms of social discrimination. But the point of this illustration is that most Jews never considered conversion a live option. To convert would have been to adopt a set of sacred symbols which did not convey any real sense of reassurance and to deny the teachings which did. They would have had to give up their sense of dignity, their sense of purpose, their confidence in God's reward - the religion that had meaning for them and gave coherence to their lives. They held fast because they could not have lived with themselves if they had done otherwise.

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

- Institutional religion affirms traditional doctrines. What if I don't agree with some or all? How can I honestly affirm doctrines I don't agree with?

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

To be sure some traditions use catechisms as a form of loyalty oath and exclude or punish anyone who cannot or will not affirm. In this respect, Judaism has shown remarkable restraint. There are informing ideas. Religions, after all, form around a special and surprising message, but the tendency has been to stay fairly loose in such matters. Synagogues do not require that prospective members sign articles of faith. Before I was ordained, I was not required to publically affirm my creed.

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

You can't. You shouldn't.

- Are you saying that Judaism has no doctrines?

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

when people began to say: I will no longer acknowledge another's authority over what I read, think or say. In the modern world, at least in our part of the modern world, freedom and autonomy are deemed virtues; authority and submission are unacceptable.

- Then I can believe what I want?

Who can stop you? But Judaism will continue to hold up and hold sacred its special and surprising message.

- Isn't that a form of domination?

No, simply the statement that there is a special and surprising message envolved which you might wish to learn about. Don't make a dogma out of freedom. When a religious body has the power of the state at its beck and call, that power can be both dangerous and corrupting, but when, as in the case of the American synagogue, the only power it possesses is the power of suggestion and example, then calling its forms coercive is inappropriate.

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

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

Two thousand years ago, the Roman Empire was the scene of an active Jewish missionary campaign. It ended only when it was proscribed, after Jews became known as troublemakers and rebels because of their revolts against the Empire, and particularly after Christianity became the imperial religion. As a small minority in both the Christian and Muslim worlds, missionary activity was forbidden to the Jew, but there is no traditional rule forbidding such activity.

Our religious ideas are critical to us and it's only natural that we should assume that they would be good for others. You question missionary activity because you are conditioned by a culture which is

sensitive to any form of coercion. Coercion is wrong. Using food or gifts or techniques of emotional manipulation on the poor or the weak is contemptible; but offering your ideas for consideration certainly cannot be faulted. I've often suggested to those I thought were seeking for a meaningful faith that they might like to come to our services and talk over religious questions with me.

- But you'd agree that coercion is wrong.

Emphatically.

- Talking about coercion, in Israel the National Religious Party has played the power game and gained control for the rabbinate of the administration of the laws regulating personal status. Would you defend this approach? Is it a Jewish approach?

I've already suggested that I disapprove of this arrangement. The question of its Jewishness, however, cannot be as easily answered. Rabbinic Judaism shaped itself during the centuries when the Jewish community was self-governing and assumes as a matter of right that, in a Jewish state, Jewish law should be enforced. They argue that there must be law, and what better law could there be than God's? Calvin's Geneva and Khomeini's Iran were/are based on the same deceptively simple and medieval logic. The problem is not that rabbinic regulations are necessarily unacceptable; in general rabbinic law is both functional and sensible, but that the present arrangement was imposed on the citizenry as the result of politicians bargaining rather than by a democratic process and, so, does not command the legitimacy public law must have to be effective in a free society. The problems of church-state relationships are complex ones. Look at the pressures in our far more pluralistic society for prayer and Christmas chorales in the public schools.

- Why can't religion content itself with moments of quiet worship? Why must it intrude itself into people's lives: Sunday Blue laws, the

right-to-life campaign, Federal aid to parochial schools?

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

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

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

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

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

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

One of the surprises of the 1980 Presidential campaign was the

abandonment by many evangelical groups of this traditional 'Hands off' attitude towards politics. I've long felt that those groups avoided politics less because of these texts than because so many of America's institutions were shaped by their traditions. Schools are out during Christmas and Easter week. Sunday is not a work day. Their attitude changed, I believe, as they recognized that American life, now wonderfully pluralistic, no longer supported their values. I was intrigued that the moral maturity focused on the issue of prayer in the public schools. This seemed to be a way to regain control and politics seemed the only way to turn America around their way.

In the Jewish scheme of things politics is accepted as an area of legitimate religious interest because piety is not treated as an end in itself. Isaiah heard God say, "Who has asked this of you to trample my courts. . . I cannot endure iniquity alone with the solemn assembly." God did not allow Moses to stay quietly in Midian enjoying domesticity with his wife and sons. The rabbinate is an active profession, not a withdrawal into secluded piety.

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

- I want to go back to this business of pressing your views on others. I was always told: it doesn't matter what you believe so long as you believe, so why should the religious care where you belong as long as you belong somewhere?

We're back to the fact that every religion forms around a special and surprising message. Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Leninism, Maoism, Naziism and, yes, the Moonies and the People's Temple, each represent a religion, yet, obviously, we would pass quite different judgments on each. Religion is not good. Religion is not bad. Religion simply is. Everyone is religiously involved: some with the traditional religions of the West; others with cults; others with economic or political ideologies; others with a healer or guru. It is a matter of some consequence which tradition you affiliate with.

- Doesn't everyone have a right to believe what they want to believe?

You cannot stop a person from believing errant nonsense, but religions impact significantly on their communicants and their communities and must be judged by these consequences. Pragmatic judgments can be made, indeed, must be made. A religious tradition like Naziism, which excites the blood lust, feeds an imperialist national ego, lauds a racist myth, and subordinates men to a Fuehrer, clearly is pernicious. One tradition encourages independent study and interpretation of its Scripture, another demands total submission to ecclesiastical authority. Buddhism encourages asceticism and withdrawal. America's civil religion encourages involvement and social action. Classic Christianity and Islam teach the damnation of non-communicants while other religions, Judaism among them, harp less on the theme that God approves only of their membership. A religious tradition like Judaism which encourages moral discipline, social justice, the cultivation

of the mind, an individual's freedom under God and the ties of human fellowship, has much to commend it.

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

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

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

It's a distinction without a sifnificant difference and rather revealing of a cultural squeamishness about taking a long hard look at the phenomenon which is religion. We and our media tend to reserve the term religion for people and traditions we approve: Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism; while cult is reserved for the likes of the Moonies, the Church of God and the People's Temple, activities of which the society

does not fully approve. Yet, until the fatal day when the community drank cyanide, the People's Temple remained an accredited member of the Disciples of Christ, a mainline Protestant denomination. I would suggest that the difference between a cult and a religion is not a distinction based on social value, one would hardly call Nazism a cult; but, rather, a distinction based on intensity and size. Cults are small groups of religious people who are a little hotter about their faith than ordinary congregations and who feel that they alone will be redeemed or that they alone possess The Truth.

Cults have emerged in every religious tradition and in every age. Whenever the mainline traditions cool down, or whenever the society is convulsed, cults appear bearing a compelling dream, demanding a transvaluation of values, the kind of whole-hearted commitment which will hasten salvation. Like sun spots, cults signal an eruption of spiritual energy: sometimes there are more eruptions and sometimes less, but there is always an outflow of power from the source. Most cults, like Jonah's gourd, appear one night and disappear the next. Some abort. Some explode. A few emerge and become mainline religions. When Jesus and his disciples wandered about the Galilee the citizens of Tiberias dismissed them as bizarre cultists who refused to attend to their family, civic, and business responsibilities out of a crazy belief that the world was about to end and that it was imperative that they prepare for Judgment Day. When the Pharisees refused to eat at any other table but one set by their own, they, too, were scorned as cultists who set ritual pieties above the normal courtesies of hospitality, and even the ties of family.

Cults are not by definition good or bad. Cults are, and, like the mainline traditions, must be judged on their activities. But this much can be said of all cults. Cult people are intense and make the cult's teachings the unmediated focus of their lives. Most people have

a family life and a work life as well as religious interests. The cultist says: 'if I don't act now it will be too late. I've no time for anything else'. A cult member is unlikely to have sufficient perspective on his group to judge its actions. Often they can be saved from themselves only by forceable deprogramming. Cults are led by prophets who have heard God or seen the light rather than by pastors who have read about those who have heard God.

- You're talking about fanaticism.

What one person calls fanaticism, another labels commendable zeal. Cults can be salutory or dangerous, depending on the beliefs around which the group has rallied, the leader who gains authority, and what subsequent generations make of their inheritance; but all suffer from the dangers which flow from an excess of zeal. Judaism has not been immune to zealous excess; no religion is; but untrammeled zeal has never been held up as an absolute virtue. The Talmud warns: do not be righteous overmuch. The Torah tradition refused to exalt any radical anti-rationalism, the mind was never to be turned off. An often quoted line from the book of Proverbs makes the point: "only fools scorn wisdom and discipline!" No sage argues as Martin Luther did that "reason is the greatest enemy that faith has; it never comes to the aid of spiritual things, but more often than not struggles against the Divine Word, treating with contempt all that emanated from God;" In Israel learning was a form of piety and wisdom piety's handmaid.

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

I'm not sure I call his act balanced or sane.

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

- Yet, we feature this story on the High Holidays.

The Akedah myth serves the same function in Judaism as the myth of the crucifixion in Christianity. Christianity begins in the Cross. Christians believe Jesus' death atoned for Adam's sin and, for the first time, opened the way of salvation to the believer. Judaism begins with the Akedah. Jews believe that Abraham's loyalty to God's command, his willingness to put his beloved son to death, earned election, God's special concern, for Abraham and his descendents. As Jews understood their history, were it not for Abraham's merit, their special and redemptive message, the covenant which God subsequently made with the one who had proved his faith, would not now be at the center of their lives. Jews tend to emphasize the reprieve with which the Akedah story concludes, which is taken as symbol of redemption. A ram is caught by its horns in a nearby thicket. Isaac need not be sacrificed. A well-known folk tale tells that, after Abraham sacrificed the ram, angels gathered its horns

and hid them and that they will remain hidden until the Messiah is about to arrive - when those horns will be sounded to announce history's fulfillment.

- But the story does glorify excess.

Kierkegaard focused on a critical issue which all religions must face and none can fully resolve. Beliefs should be acted on, so the inescapable and never fully resolvable question, how far should you take your beliefs? At what point, if any, must prudence and empathy override obedience to the religious command? You can find Biblical incidents which illustrate Kierkegaard's 'obey at all costs' position. When Elijah saw the people accommodating themselves to Baal worship, he cried out: "How long will you hold between two opinions? If the Lord is God follow Him, if God is God follow Him"; either/or; Elijah had no patience with compromise and in his zeal he ordered the slaughter of the priests of Baal. Moses provides a contrasting example. When the community builds the infamous Golden Calf and dances before it, God pronounces the nation's destruction. God tells Moses he will raise up a new community out of Moses' own family. Moses will not have it. He takes his life in his hand, remember God is livid with anger, and intercedes with God to restrain His anger and to reduce the sentence which He has pronounced. Judaism has and has had its fanatics. Some we revere: Jeremiah, Akiba, Eliezer Ben Yehudah. Others we are less certain of: Daniel, Shabbatai Tzvi, the Naturei Karta. By their deeds shall you know them. If our fanatics have rarely put others to the sword this may in part be explained by the fact that minorities are rarely in a position to do so. Since power corrupts, being of a persecuted minority is good for the soul.

- I remember hearing my rabbi say that at Sinai the Israelites agreed to the Torah covenant without hearing its terms and that their

trust counted as a virtue. Religion always seems to be glorifying obedience. I want to know what I'm committing myself to.

Sinai stands for the original insights. These are the given, the axioms, Judaism's special and surprising message. These commandments are always pre-nationic. I've always looked on the Sinai episode as a dramatic statement of the truth that ultimate truths must be taken on faith, but I also believe that, once these are in place, once there is a basis for thought, reason and experience can and should come into play. All religions are based on such founding truths. Another distinction among religions is that between those which demand absolute submission to the interpretations of a central authority and those which welcome the trained and inquisitive mind and suggest that there is benefit in constantly re-examining the meaning of the founding message. The rabbis taught that after Moses no one received a revelation which proved his interpretation of the meaning of Torah. A prophet who claims a revelation which resolves a debateble issue is convicted out of his own mouth as a false prophet. The Talmud describes an academic debate in which God sides with the minority and the majority will not change their opinions. In Judaism there is no one whose words are infallible. The Torah tradition falls into that re-examination category. Judaism looked on the mind as a divine gift. The daily service includes the petition, "Favor us, O Lord, with knowledge, understanding and discernment. Praised be You, O Lord, gracious Giver of knowledge." An approach which says "the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath" has taken an attitude of restraint towards revelation which warns the believer not to set the needs of humanity aside out of zeal to obey the letter of the revelation.

- We're back to the Sabbath stone throwers.

Energy surges around and within any religion. It's there because

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

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

Religion is not good. Religion is not bad. Religion is. The religious spirit is insistent. The religiously committed are impatient. Judgment and commitment pull against each other for command of our souls.

Chapter 3

CAN THE LEOPARD CHANGE HIS SPOTS

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

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

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

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

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

However disconcerting the thought may be, no one completely shakes off the influences of home and neighborhood. A person can renounce citizenship - in his native country or native religion - and years later feel himself drawn back. Around every synagogue you'll find a cluster of spiritual returnees - there's even a familiar name for them, ba'alei teshuvah - usually middle-aged men and women who for years went their separate ways but eventually felt a need to come in out of the secular cold. Perhaps you've noticed as I have that some who abandon the Torah tradition for the Christian gospel then try to create synagogue-type institutions where they can maintain some of the familiar forms as if nothing has changed. The emotional hold of our early patterns may explain why many people, instinctively and often against their sense of fairness, tend to doubt the authenticity of any conversion. For instance, in Communist Russia and China children of privileged families are never free from the suspicion that they were "capitalist roaders," and in our own country both Jews and non-Jews label as a Jew a public figure who had a Jewish background, whether or not that person is actively involved in Jewish life or even considers himself a Jew.

Margaret Mead once told me that similar feelings tug incessantly at the emigrant. Need drives him abroad and loneliness drives him back home. The peasants who left the country villages of Eastern and Southern Europe for the Pennsylvania coal mines or Ohio steel mills fled poverty,

but even those who prospered rarely felt rooted. A considerable number, once their children were safely educated, returned to the old country to retire and die in familiar surroundings.

In our culture which places so much emphasis on self-determination, we're encouraged to put some distance between ourselves and our home in order to examine critically our purposes and loyalties and, as the saying goes, 'to find ourselves'. Most parents encourage their children to go away to school or to work out of town for just that reason. But when you're away you still carry your home in your soul. We can modify our conditioning, but never fully deny it. To say, "When it's time I'll make up my mind" is to reveal innocence. Your mind and soul are already caught in an invisible but potent web of conditioning. Given the psychological and emotional wrench of conversion, I think it's wise to examine the possibilities of one's native tradition before seeking to exchange it for another.

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

Perhaps you could. For a person raised in a home where Judaism is a nonessential, even if the family occasionally talked about Israel or gave perfunctory annual donations to the United Jewish Appeal or called in a rabbi when a daughter married or a grandfather died, there's probably not much tension in leaving and sliding over into the civil religion or some other tradition which refracts the values of his home. Of course, there's still the matter of labels and of judging whether the civil religion's message satisfies you deep down.

- You say becoming Jewish can make a difference, but I don't see it - not in my home, not in the way we live. I mean we live nicely and we're decent people, but an occasional candle-lighting doesn't seem to

me to have anything to do with my character or beliefs.

Given your experience I don't doubt that you find it hard to recognize what's really at stake in the religious enterprise. That's why I've made such a point of defining the emotional needs which make us all religious. Your home called itself Jewish, but it treated the Torah tradition ritually and institutionally rather than as a matrix of redemptive values and you understandably learned to conceive of it as a set of externals which could be done or not done according to one's will. Your parents thought of religion as a set of ideas and institutions out there in the synagogue or its many books but, in fact, there was more of the Torah tradition in your home than you, or they, were conscious of.

I know your parents. They are politically active and politically liberal. I suggest that their attitudes towards welfare legislation and the race issue reflect the values of Jewish communal life in which they were raised; remember the Lisbon synagogue I told you about and the prophet's insistence that there is only one human family: "Have we all not one Father, has not one God created us all?"

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

The reticence you describe is fairly widespread among Jews, and it needs examining, though I don't claim to understand it fully. For some this silence masks theological doubts. Particularly if they're active in the Jewish community they don't want their involvement or judgment questioned on the grounds that as non-believers they're not qualified to make decisions. For others it's a question of embarrassment in believing what some may dismiss as childish or simply not knowing what words to use to explain a half-formed feeling. I can't tell you how many times teen agers have asked me about these issues and added: 'My parents told me that you'd know.' There's also the cultural fact that

Jews aren't accustomed to making public testimonies; we never confess to anyone but God.

- I went to a Wednesday night service at a local church. From time to time people got up and told how they had found Jesus. I've never heard such testimonies at any of our services, much less in my home.

Jews don't have to prove that they have a right to be part of the congregation. A Jew is a Jew. We've never felt compelled to testify to our loyalty. We have never organized public worship to encourage a person to make a public witness.

- But I found those testimonies moving.

You'll soon see that institutes like this one, where the conversation does include testimony from people to whom being Jewish <u>is</u> significant, where there is a warm and informal Sabbath service, can be eye-openers to the Jew who's not yet alive to being Jewish. I remember a camper at another institute who told me he'd never before met anyone who took Judaism seriously.

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

To be Jewish is to belong to a community of fate, only part of which is also a community of faith. Personally they obviously felt little need for any discipline of worship, but they sent you to religious school and were involved with the resettlement of Russian refugees and the annual United Jewish Appeal campaign. Some Jews believe and practice minimally. Others believe and practice in non-traditional ways, others exactly according to the tradition. People with many different faith

commitments exist in our communities, but all Jews are bound together by the exigencies of history and the shape of the religion and, consequently, must confront, at least to some degree, all its institutions, ideas, and traditions. You were sent to religious school, I suspect, because they recognized that, though the forms of the religious life did not seem essential to them, their interests, attitudes and activities derived to a large degree from a Jewish cluster of ideas, hopes and institutions and they wanted you to be exposed to Judaism's well spring of special and surprising message so that you could and would fully appreciate it.

- My home may not be an old-fashioned home with two sets of dishes and my mother doesn't wear a sheitel, but there's a mezuzah on the door and a palpable Jewish atmosphere. We've adopted a Russian emigrant family who celebrate the holidays with us. My folks are active in the congregation. They took me to Israel for my Bar Mitzvah. When grandfather died we sat shivah.

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

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

So am I sometimes. But then conformity has never been a Jewish virtue. Moses led an amalgam of tribes, according to tradition, twelve, each independent, yet bound together by where they had been, Egypt, and where they were going, The Promised Land. During the century before the Romans destroyed The Temple in Jerusalem, the Jewish community included Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, Theraputme, apocalyptics, the Dead Sea monastics and Hasidim, and my list includes only those who cared deeply enough to create a special sect. Later sages insisted that the destruction of The Temple had occurred because divisions had

arisen in Israel; but in truth there has never been a time without division. We're a fiercely independent lot, you know the old line, 'two Jews, three opinions', yet, with it all, let there be need and the divisions are overlooked and most of us pull together.

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

According to rabbinic law, a Jew is a person born to a Jewish mother or one who converts. This narrow definition reflects ancient legal practice. The Hebrews, like all the peoples of the ancient Middle East, practiced polygamy, and some rule based on maternal descent was required to settle questions of inheritance and precedence among the many sons of a chief. In effect, it means that you become a Jew in the same way that anyone becomes an American citizen - by being born to parents who are citizens. Beyond this there is conversion, which parallels the process of acquiring citizenship through naturalization. Despite its antique flavor, I rather like the law's matter-of-factness; despite all our pretensions to being free spirits, in the final analysis we are in large measure what our early environment allows us to be, and mothers have a lot to do with that environment.

- I thought we didn't seek converts.

We did when we were allowed to. The New Testament describes Jews who crossed and recrossed the Mediterranean for that purpose. Jews sought converts until prohibited to do so by Roman authorities determined to punish the Jews for rebellion and, then, after Constantine, by Christian emperors who believed that error had no right to be promulgated. Until modern times it remained unsafe and potentially suicidal for Jews even to suggest conversion. If, during the Middle Ages, someone converted to Judaism, the convert and the converter, if caught, were tortured and executed.

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

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

- Get back to the larger issues. What really makes a Jew a Jew?

Often 'becoming' Jewish begins with a binding experience which motivates us to take Judaism seriously. A student recently told me that he loved the songs and chants but had never paid much attention to the liturgy - in fact, he said it bored him and that he'd learned to ignore it - until one day, "a word got through." He didn't know why, exactly, but he began to listen and to care. I suggested to him that familiar things have the power to bind us to them. While I was at Oxford on a sabbatical the Church of England introduced a new Book of Common Prayer. The newspapers were soon full of letters criticizing the change. Everyone admitted the familiar old service was written in a language Englishmen no longer speak, but as one letter put it: "The virtue of the modern idiom cannot take the place of words whose associations are so much richer than their surface meanings," which I translate to mean "a phrase got through and you're taking it away from me."

I use the word "binding" to describe a particular moment or experience that opens up feelings about your religious tradition that you've never had before. For many in my generation, we were in our late teens and early twenties during the second World War, the binding experience was the shattering reality of the Death Camps and/or our surprise that a Jewish state could actually be established against seemingly insuperable odds. On May 15, 1948, the day Israel proclaimed her independence, I was working for the Jewish Agency securing materials needed

for the struggle against invading Arab armies, and as the news of independence flashed over the air my eyes clouded up, all doubts were swept aside and Jacob's phrase crossed my mind: "Surely God is in this place, and I knew it not."

A binding experience is by definition an emotional moment, but, to get back to the question of public testimonies, it's to the everlasting credit of our religious leaders that they were unwilling to focus Judaism on feeling alone, or to orchestrate the religious life so that it tried to take advantage of people's susceptibilities. The synagogue rarely took on the circus aspect of a revivalist tent meeting. Deep in our culture lies a profound distrust of feeling cut loose from its moorings in a defining tradition. Judaism takes a patient approach: schooling, as well as experience; a fixed liturgy as well as prayers spoken as the spirit moves us. The question is not whether you will feel happier as a religious Jew but whether your involvement with the Torah tradition will help you lead a more coherent and ethically sensitive life.

Whether native-born or convert, one develops a Jewish identity in much the same way: through a process that combines feeling, knowledge and familiarity. To the question, where is God, a sage answered: "Wherever man lets him in." When I'm asked, how can I come alive as a Jew, how can I have a lively faith, I answer: "Light Chanukah lights and Sabbath candles, sing Hatikvah and Jerusalem the Golden, join in the synagogue worship, work in the Jewish community. Give it a chance. Open yourself up to it." Don't sit in services daring the music and words to get through to you; envolve yourself in the moment. Let it carry you along.

- I tried. I went and nothing happened.

Try again. The first time you're a stranger. Binding tends to accompany familiarity.

- I thought those moments hit you like a bolt out of the blue. They sometimes do or seem to. But, more often, I suspect, we simply find that the familiar has become part of us.

- I've had a bolt out of the blue experience. It happened to me at the Wall. It was dark. There was just enough sun left to bring out the golden glow in Jerusalem's stone. A few old Jews were praying. I don't know what happened, but suddenly I felt that the whole of Jewish history was alive for me.

Moses had a similar experience when he unexpectedly came across the Burning Bush and heard the commanding voice that transformed his life. But unlike some other religions Judaism never made this kind of transforming experience a requirement of belonging. We don't accept a convert simply because he testifies that he has seen the Jewish light; the right religion doesn't suddenly hit you over the head; for conversion to be a full experience the convert must feel at home and comfortable with the patterns and attitudes of his new community; and what's true for the convert is equally true for the home born.

- I thought Bar Mitzvah was the occasion when you became a Jew.

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

- I'm still not convinced by your basic thesis about the difficulty of conversion. People do convert.

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

Conditioning affects us in many ways. There are Jews who have given up formal affiliation but who take an active interest in Israel or who simply can't let go of the Jewish "problem". An old Stalinist, Isaac Deutscher, called his autobiography <u>The Non-Jewish Jew</u>. As a young man he had renounced the synagogue and converted to Communism, but obviously he still thought of himself as a Jew and remained fiercely proud of being heir to a tradition of prophetic outrage at injustice. I have a philosopher friend who's a confirmed atheist and a tireless religious explorer; he goes cheerfully to services in Indian temples and Shinto shrines but he hasn't been inside a synagogue since his <u>Bar Mitzvah</u>. He says he doesn't like to be "tied" down, but he just happened to take his sabbatical at the Hebrew University, and he's profoundly involved with the political security of the State of Israel. It's hard to let go.

- And they won't let you go. I'm always arguing with my roommate who insists that public figures like William Simon and Caspar Weinberg are Jews. I tell her they converted years ago, but she comes right back to their Jewishness.

One reason the leopard can't change his spots is that a leopard is expected to have spots. In 1492 the long Christian crusade to reconquer Spain from the Moors finally succeeded; and that same year Ferdinand and Isabella, as rulers of a united and Catholic Spain, gave their Jews the cruel choice of baptism or death. Those Jews who allowed themselves to be sprinkled with holy water found they weren't accepted as Christians; they were called New Christians and treated as outsiders, a practice that lasted for at least three centuries during which the faith of these families was regularly and rigorously reviewed by the Inquisition. In Nazi Germany the children of a Lutheran father and his pious wife were classified as Jews if two of their grandparents had been Jews. A Jewish boy and a Christian boy might be classmates in Berlin all through the 1920's but Germany's political myths would have seen to it that in the 1930's one would become a victim and the other, willingly or passively, a supporter of his murderers. In the Soviet Union today descendants of Jewish heroes of the revolution remain Jews by nationality, whatever the fervor of their allegiance to the Communist Party, and increasingly, as the Soviets woo the Arab world, Jews are made to suffer from educational and job restrictions; Jewish enrollment in Russia's universities has been severely restricted, and careers in diplomacy, the officer ranks of the army, and in advanced physics are closed to them.

- But all that's out there. Here in America it's different.

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

Like it or not, the Jewish people play a major, largely negative,

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role in the religious myths of Muslims and Christians, and the prejudices bred by these myths are projected on to all Jews, including those who no longer consider themselves Jewish. To orthodox Christians Jews are the once-chosen people who proved deaf and blind to the new Truth and so were abandoned by God; many add to this "proof" of Jewish short-sightedness. The myth that the Roman governor gave the Jews the choice of freeing a murderer and of freeing Jesus, and the Jews chose to free Barabbas. The Church, built on these legends, what Jules Simon has called "A teaching of contempt" whose basic thesis was that God had not only abandoned the Jews but sentenced them to wander ceaselessly as outcasts and pariahs. Millions were taught that to treat the Jew as equal or well born would be an act of rebellion against God. Over time this myth generated some imaginative, always negative, images: the wandering Jew, the Christ-killer, a people set aside by God for punishment; Shylock, the omnipresent subversive, the Jew as Communist or Capitalist, the secret cabinet of the Elders of Zion. Even in this "enlightened" age, anti-semitism remains a major element in the racist attitudes of the West.

Islam has its own anti-Jewish myths which, unfortunately, today are in full cry, fed by a powerful reaction to westernization, Muslim imperialism and frustration that Arab armies have not been able to destroy the State of Israel. Mohammed at first had great hopes that the Jews of Arabia would accept his leadership. When they didn't, he turned the sword of Islam against them and ordered that Jews be rooted out of Arabia. A number of his anti-Jewish fulminations were enshrined in the Koran. Islam sees the Jews as possessing a botched version of revelation, descendants of the first people to refuse God's message. In Muslim countries, though not in Arabia where to this day Jews are not allowed to settle, the Jew existed on tolerance and remained an outsider who had to wear distinguishing clothes so faithful Muslims would be reminded of

his difference and that his presence was a privilege, not a right.

The persistence of such mythic identification can hardly be exaggerated. In a recent poll ninety percent of the respondents identified Karl Marx as a Jew. The identification dies hard. When the Oxford dictionary was revised a few years ago the editors refused to remove from the entry, 'Jew', a definition that read, 'one who cheats by sharp business practices'.

- Why?

On the grounds that this usage was common.

- What can we do about anti-semitism?

Unfortunately, very little. Prejudices are not amenable to reason. Worse, those who are persecuted are often half-convinced by their persecutors that they are at fault.

I got the question I expected:

- Well, aren't we? Nobody likes people who feel superior. Haven't we claimed to be a Chosen People?

The problem is not a theological thesis but the simple fact that human beings seem to have a low tolerance for differences. I suppose this attitude goes back to some primitive survival mechanism. Animals protect their own against strangers. Those who justify their prejudices by claiming that Jews are arrogant about a special relationship with God are often precisely those who claim that Christians are the New Israel, specially beloved of God, and that only <u>they</u> will be saved.

- Yes, but this Chosen People idea invites attack; it sounds so arrogant.

Let's define the Chosen People theme as clearly as we can. The concept is not a racial one. The law is specific: the Jewish community is an open community. A Jew is a Jew by virtue of birth or conversion, and the convert is the full equal of one-born a Jew. The Biblical

tradition emphasized that Ruth, a convert, was deemed worthy of being the great-grandmother of King David and, by inference, a direct ancestor of the Messiah.

The Torah tradition never claims that Jews are biologically superior. Abraham was a semi-nomad of no particular nobility. Those whom Moses led out of Egypt are described as an asefsuf, an undistinguished motley. The Bible is innocent of the sort of myth common among ancient peoples, that they or their kings were descendants of the gods. When he brought a harvest offering to The Temple, the Israelite defined his ancestry simply: "A wandering Aramean was my father."

If some Jews have felt themselves genetically superior, they could not find support in the tradition, and such rare displays of chauvinism simply testify to the fact that Jews, too, are human; the more the outside world derided the Jew the more pride became a necessary survival mechanism. If there was pride of community, it was based not on genes but on the quality of Jewish life. Eastern European Jews were as impoverished as the illiterate peasants who subjected them to daily humiliation, but they were literate and even the local nobility depended on Jews to treat their illnesses, manage their estates and keep their books. In such an environment it is not surprising that Jews often felt contempt for their neighbors and that Goy, originally a Hebrew word, which denotes without any pejorative connotation a nation or a people, became a put down term. But such feelings were not supported by the religious tradition. The Torah tradition never claimed that the followers of other religions were damned or encouraged Jews to treat non-Jews with contempt.

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

Yes and no. The situation is not ideal and, to a large degree, created by security problems, but there are Arab members of the Kenesset,

Arab-owned and run newspapers, and Arab professors and students at the Hebrew University. Incidentally, Jews do not enjoy, and have never enjoyed, comparable rights in any Arab state. Israel's police force protect mosques and Muslim holy places from any attack by fanatics, and many Jewish Israelis are among those who are pushing for the maximum relaxation of these emergency measures as consonant with national security. The significant point is that Israel's restrictions are temporary measures and are not justified by anyone on a religious basis. Israelis generally accept the Biblical injunction, "Zion must be established in justice" and they know that God's justice is not reserved only to them.

- Jews do feel different. I know I do.

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

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

It also makes civilization possible. The value of a pluralistic society is that no set of values can ever harden on the society. Someone is always challenging what others assume to be obvious and which, in fact, is not obvious at all but simply familiar. As the French say: Vive la difference; difference kept a community from developing tired blood.

- But surely you'd agree that there's no virtue in differences

for the sake of being different. Groups like Hare Krishna leave me cold. They seem to make a virtue of being far out.

Significance by all means. The special and surprising message of a cult may be special and surprising and unhelpful. Think of those millenalian cults who are certain the world will end on a particular day.

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

Don't judge too quickly. Most traditional Jews know that these disciplines are signs of obedience to a covenant whose values affect everything they do. The beginning of the Jew's distinction is to be located not in biology but in the acceptance of the Commandments and the Covenant. At Sinai Israel did not accept God. God does not need acceptance; rather, God offered Israel a covenant, and Israel accepted its terms. I like Abraham Heschel's phrase: "God gave His word to Israel, and Israel gave its word of honor to God." Sinai involved a transforming commitment. Whether we accept the traditional description of a popular acclamation then and there of the whole Torah, or understand the Torah as a compilation of Divine Instruction given at various times and places over many centuries, whether the Jews were chosen by God for His own reasons, as traditional theology has it, or whether they chose to serve God, as humanists say, no one denies that Jews, Israel, came to feel chosen and obligated to a sense of mission and a special role and that these folk set out on a distinctive road which they and their generations have followed ever since. Sinai is Jewish shorthand for the moment of choice and being chosen, when the Covenant was proclaimed and affirmed, when Israel took to itself its "special and surprising word." Sinai symbolizes the critical moment when the tribes ceased to be among the anonymous clans of black-tented bedouin shepherds who ranged across the Fertile Crescent and became a people of significance to themselves

and to civilization.

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

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

I'm not particularly troubled by such traditional phrases because they say to me simply, 'be grateful that you belong to a people who sensed a special duty and set out to do it.' My children used to say to me: why can't we do this or that, our friends' parents allow them to; my answer was always, each family must set its own standards. The rabbis often warned: don't follow the mob when they are up to no good. I've discovered through experience that a family or a community whose members feel a special obligation to their family name, what the French call noblesse oblige, often have an extraordinary impact on their times. For seven generations scholar descendants of Maimonides were named to be the religious heads of Egypt's Jewish communities. I don't mean that all Jews have been good, saintly, or necessarily conscious of any high obligation; far from it. I just finished reading a book entitled, The Rise and Fall of the American Jewish Gangster. Nor do I suggest that all Jews have been creative or wise. We've had our fools and our fanatics. I do mean that as a people we have internalized a sense of historic purpose and consequently spun out a remarkably healthy and ennobling pattern of human relationships and that many in every generation have felt encouraged and ennobled by this sense of specialness.

Sociologists often use a theoretical concept they call <u>anomie</u>. The word comes from the same root as anonymous and describes the fact that a stranger will act less circumspectly than a person who might be recognized. People act differently in a mob than at a family outing. The Ku Klux Klan is a menacing presence because those who hide behind masks can commit violence without being recognized as the town banker or garage man. To be known is to feel compelled to live up to our public roles. As a Chosen People, Jews could never let down because God was always watching them and because the choice was not an off-handed one but a serious commitment to a demanding set of commandments. Had Jews not accepted the Torah, God's choice would have gone to some other nation. Prophets like Amos and Hosea raised the possibility that, if the people continued to default on their duties, God would divorce them and choose another.

Like a capable student whose capacity is recognized, more was demanded of the Jew and top grades were harder to come by. They heard God saying: 'I didn't raise you up to be ordinary'. Being chosen means that Israel is subjected to more, not less, rigorous standards than other peoples. Covenant thinking centers on extra duties rather than special favors. The prophet Amos laid it out: "You specially have I known among the peoples of the earth, therefore will I visit upon you all your iniquities."

- That's pretty hard to take. When my parents spoke that way to me, I always felt uncomfortable. I wanted to say, 'why must I be different?'

It's demanding, absolutely. Anybody who wants to be left alone to enjoy his backyard and a beer certainly wants no part of a special destiny whose demands pull him away from the quiet and comfortable life. There's a choice we all must make between hard work and special demands

on the one hand and what I call an LCD, Least Common Denominator, life on the other.

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

According to the Torah, God's first covenant with Israel was announced to Abraham; it was a simple document of fealty, promise, and protection. The later Sinai covenant contained all the rules. The Torah goes on at length about its proclamation. Its terms were announced on the mountain of revelation by the King of Kings and there acclaimed by Israel, His servants, for their day and for all time. So important were the covenanted commandments and the fact of this new relationship articles
that the/ were sealed in blood. The rite of circumcision, the taking of a drop of blood from every male infant was declared to be an act of enrollment in this covenant relationship. Some believe that one of the most important ceremonies in ancient Israel was a covenant renewal ritual at which the terms of the rule were read out and the tribal chiefs acclaimed this fundamental charter. Till this day the public reading of the Torah in the synagogue, which is after all simply the covenant document, is taken as a symbolic reaffirmation of the acceptance of the berit.

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

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

- But why Israel?

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

- It would seem to be a lot easier to stay undistinguished. I try to stay out of my boss's way.

No religious vision is worthwhile if it doesn't lift us out of laziness and compromise. Just after World War II Joshua Loth Liebman

wrote a perceptive little book, Peace of Mind, which presented the calming and comforting benefits of religion and quickly became a best-seller. I've sensed the feeling of well-being that comes when I'm sure I'm doing what's right; but I've also found Judaism more than a bit unsettling; even when I'm confident about what I'm doing, there is that sense that I could be doing more. The covenant is not simply a list of do's and don'ts but a reminder of a range of duties which cannot be stipulated and can never be fully met. The tradition calls these lifneh v'lifnim meshurat ha-din, above and beyond what is specified. The extra time spent with someone who is frightened or disturbed, volunteering for some service when no one else will step forward, testing a vaccine on yourself when there is no other way to prove its efficacy.

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

Not at all. God cares how all nations act. There was a covenant for Israel and one for all mankind; indeed, the covenant with Noah, which is the universal covenant, preceded Israel's. Its rules were general, the prohibition of idolatry, blasphemy, murder, adultery, robbery and cannibalism and the mandate to establish courts of justice; but the sense of duty and the promise of reward were no less real. The Jewish tradition says that God is the God of all men, that we are all descendants of common procreations, that Heaven is open to any and all who deserve it, that God's instructions are to be shared, and that His promise at the End of Days is for all peoples.

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

- I thought you said that conversion was next to impossible.

I suggested that conversion was a long, hard road. The convert has to translate an intellectual or emotional decision into a pattern of life which can come to seem natural only with time and practice. A year ago a lady came to talk. I had given her instruction twenty years before. "You know," she said, "I've never doubted it was the right decision, but only in the last months have I really looked on the synagogue as my religious home."

- Why are Jews accused of being clannish?

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

Protest came from another direction.

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

God signs Himself: "I am the Lord, your God, Who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage." Freedom is the original virtue. Among the Israelites a curious ritual dramatized the imperative of freedom; there was a law that on the sabbatical year Hebrew slaves were to be freed: A slave who preferred the shabby security of remaining somebody else's responsibility to the challenge of freedom had his ear lobe pierced as a sign that his hearing must be defective since he somehow hadn't heard God proclaim the law of release. The Hebrews had been slaves and memory of the brutality they had endured kept fresh;

each Passover the Seder service has us all say: "We were slaves to Pharoah in Egypt." Knowing what it means to be beaten and degraded Jews have a special obligation to help restore others to their freedom and to treat others with dignity.

Heine, I think it was, who said, "Freedom speaks with a Hebrew accent." The Jewish spirit does not rest easily within any coercive systems. Czarist Russia held the Jew at arm's length because our presence suggested the illegitimacy of autocracy. Hitler's pathological hate of the Jew was fueled in part because our very existence suggested all those values which oppose submission to any fuehrer.

- But there is so much law.

Freedom without law is anarchy. The ex-slaves were a confused rabble until they accepted the covenant. Law permits freedom. The Israelites did not become saints overnight; but, as they learned to live under the law, they began to act with some degree of responsibility. Love can thrive only when two people are careful of their responsibilities to each other. Art emerges only when the artist has mastered his materials. Arthur Rubinstein practiced for many hours every day of his life; did his practice stifle his ability to shape the music to his genius? How can anyone make up their mind, intelligently, until they've researched an issue? Spontaneity gives grace to our actions only after discipline and preparation have refined our talents and shaped our character; otherwise, spontaneity is pointless self-indulgence. There's a world of difference between "being creative" and "letting it all hang out."

- Right. A friend of mine who was blocked halfway through a novel told me he tried drugs to help him finish it. He told me that what he produced under the influence was trash. He finished the novel only when he cleared his head and sweated it out at the typewriter.

- Law is coercive. -

I remember reading a book on the First Amendment which made the point that precisely because a system of free expression is designed to encourage a measure of conflict within a society, it needs what the author called "the legitimizing and harmonizing influence of the legal process to keep it in successful balance." Law guarantees freedom. There are rules and rules. A Fascist state has rules. So does a free society. And they're not the same.

- But the American Constitution is a social contract, the Torah is an arbitrary rule. God announced the law and Israel accepted, no questions, no amendments.

True. Constitutional democracy was not yet an idea whose time had come. But remember, Sinai is not a symbol for all law, but for God's law. The Torah Tradition assumes that God's law is equitable and just and rejects arbitrary and capricious law. According to Deuteronomy, a king was required to write a Sefer Torah by his own hand and have it read to him frequently as a reminder that power was his only as long as his acts conformed to its strictures. There is no record of a king announcing on his own authority fundamental law. Sensitivity to the oppressed is imprinted in nearly every chapter of Torah law. We must not deny justice to the powerless, favor in court the well-placed or mock those of strange dress or manner. Open the legal sections of Torah; you will find yourself reading rules requiring repayment for property damage, just weights and just measures and due process in court procedure.

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

Neither did many rabbis. Torah is the written text. There was also an oral tradition which drew into Torah other rules and developed Israel's understanding of what each Torah rule implied. In most cases sentencing in capital cases was so limited by due process qualifications

that it became almost impossible to condemn a criminal to death, and that seems to have been a deliberate decision by the sages.

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

Neither do I. And neither did many of the traditional rabbis. Their problem was that they were bound to a text which used male pronouns and so seemed to require this interpretation. How do I know what the rabbis felt? Over the ages rabbinic courts exerted all kinds of pressure to force husbands who were holding their wives to an impossible relationship to proceed with the necessary divorce. I should add what we often forget, that the Torah permits the dissolution of unhealthy relationships, some traditions do not, and that it didn't require the partners to make ugly public against each other.

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

True, but in most cases I can see their virtue; in a particular environment and frame the spirit of the law is more important than the letter. The famous phrase Israel spoke at Sinai, "We will obey and we will listen," some understand as abject submission. To me it suggests acknowledgment of a covenant of responsibility whose full implication would emerge over time.

- I've looked at the Torah and I found some things I agreed with and many I did not. I'm not interested in burning witches. I once picked up a Talmud and skimmed a page or two. It seemed to deal with the minutia of ritual and with a whole lot of non-religious matters as torts and contracts. How can you make such high-blown claims for such pedestrian stuff?

You're right. To read a translation of either anthology is to

read material that is alternately archaic and relevant, stirring and boring. I skim over all those 'begats' at the beginning of Genesis. The elaborate discussion of the precise time to recite the Shema in the opening chapter of the Talmud tells me more than I care to know on the subject. Both anthologies are ancient documents full of rules we have outgrown or find unacceptable, but they represent many a transforming theme, which succeeding generations worked out with much benefit. It is this reading and the interpretation of the Torah which was and is the central act of devotion in the synagogue; and the reading and interpretation of Talmud was and is the central act of devotion in the yeshivah. Torah and Talmud are books and they are also beginnings. I spoke of the living tradition not just the printed text.

- What about those unfortunate witches?

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

As American citizens, our lives are governed by Anglo-American common law rather than by rabbinic law, but the principles of the Talmudic system are well worth investigation and suggest judicial practices which might be adopted with benefit. One good example: reports on torture as a means of criminal investigation are rare in Jewish records and police brutality is almost unheard of. The reason is simple. Under Talmudic law voluntary self-incrimination is not accepted as evidence. Why torture a prisoner if your case was not advanced by his confession?

Commercial regulations as codified in the Torah and Talmud reflect much less sophisticated markets. I have no ox and am not likely to find myself in court because my ox wandered into my neighbor's back yard and

did damage; but the idea that damages and commerce are religious concerns and that the same standards apply for business and for family is a concept of prime importance. The Torah tradition does not accept the idea that you can be not quite honest in commerce or politics, because it's a jungle out there or because it's all right to take advantage of those you don't know. "There is to be one law for the stranger and the home born." "In all your ways acknowledge Him."

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

There is a rule in Deuteronomy that, once the tribes enter the Promised Land, cities of refuge are to be designated where someone who has committed an unpremeditated murder could flee and escape revenge. Some historians doubt that such cities actually were established; but the idea suggests a central element in the Torah's concern for justice. In those days, when a man was murdered, kinsmen organized a posse and sought revenge. There was a certain primitive justice in all this, but its execution was crude. Not all murders are alike: some are premeditated, some are accidental, while others are committed under mitigating

circumstances. Given the fact that there was no such entity as an organized police force or a federal judiciary in ancient Israel, probably the only way available to distinguish degrees of culpability was to create sanctuaries to which a man could flee until some court or sheik took over from the posse. Whether such cities actually existed is not as important as the fact that rule existed. It focused legal thought on due process, change of venue, and a fair trial, worthy concerns indeed, and ones which were fully and thoughtfully developed in rabbinic thought.

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

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

Originally, there were many Israelite shrines, some of which,

like the sanctuary at Arad, have been excavated in recent years. Then all worship was centered in the shrine King Solomon built in Jerusalem. That's the form of worship the Torah prescribes, but as Jewish life spread across the Middle East Jews established meeting houses in all their settlements where they conducted public business and recited the songs and liturgy of the central shrine. With the destruction of the Temple, these meeting places were transformed into synagogue-sanctuaries and a new religious institution emerged. Neither meeting house nor synagogue is ever mentioned in Scripture; yet, the need was there and when there is need what a text does not specifically prohibit becomes permitted. The Temple had been hierarchal, but in the synagogue anyone could lead worship. The Temple's architecture had been important because its dimensions were said to represent the proportions of the cosmos; the synagogue was simply a room. The Temple had to be in Jerusalem on Mt. Zion; synagogues could be any place. The Temple's worship centered on sacrifices; in the synagogue Torah reading and the psalms were central to the worship and so the Jew was constantly reminded of his tradition's central teachings.

- Do you mean that the Torah was not read in the Temple?

We're not sure. Ezra and others are reported to have read portions of Torah to assemblies convened in Jerusalem's market place. There are some reports of a proto-synagogue on the Temple Mount, but the priest's office seems to have centered on the sacrificial cult and accompanying psalms rather than public Torah reporting.

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

The bell rang. We had covered a lot of territory. There was a

nature walk that afternoon and we'd have only a few minutes together before dinner, and I took a final minute to pull together what I had said. There is a sense in which being born a Jew, or a Christian or a Buddhist, forever colors our lives. Ultimately, the best reason to "become" a Jew is that you have the chance to and that there is a good bit of evidence as to the value of such an identity. Psychologists describe acceptance of what you are as one key to mental health. Another way is to maximize your "given". Since we cannot shed our soul, we would be foolish to squander the opportunity to appropriate for ourselves a noble and engaging inheritance - to give up being of the chosen.

Chapter 4

WHY KEEP AT IT?

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

- My neighborhood was heavily Jewish and I reached high school before I realized that not everybody was one of us. I still remember how surprised I was when it began to penetrate my thick skill that there are only sixteen million Jews among the four billion people on earth. In the laboratory there's such a thing as a critical mass. A chemical can be in such minute quantities that it can no longer catalyse a reaction. Aren't we Jews at or below that point? And, if we can't make the kind of contribution that would make us significant to civilization, why keep at it?

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

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

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

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

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

Probably because Jews are in the news so much. We are members of an upwardly mobile, extremely visible, achievement-oriented group, and almost every day one or another Jewish artist, musician, entrepreneur, physician, professor or one of our not quite kosher characters make news. The seven o'clock evening news nearly always includes a report on the Arab-Israel conflict. As elections approach candidates for major office seek Jews out and speak to Jewish issues. We're concentrated in key urban areas and take advantage of the political process. Then, too, we look for Jews who make or have made important artistic, scientific, political or even sport contributions. There's a certain comfort in the feeling that Jews are influential in many circles. We need to believe that quality, not quantity, counts and the achievements of the Kissingers, Shapiros and Browns are surprisingly satisfying.

- Why did Jews advance from impoverished immigrant to the American middle class faster than most other minorities?

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

Actually it was the Torah tradition that turned us in the right direction. The immigrant family may not have understood what C.C.N.Y. taught, but the young were pushed to register, learning was valued; and, when the knowledge explosion came, many Jews possessed desperately needed skills. A major element in Judaism's special and surprising message was that literacy was a prerequisite for the religious life. Study was an act of devotion: "and you shall teach them [the commandments] to your children." By the second century of this era a compulsory education policy had been developed, at least for males, which was maintained over the subsequent centuries. In medieval Europe literacy was almost universal among Jews at a time when to prove he was a priest a Christian had only to show he could read. "We are the only European people," says Hannah Arent, "who have survived from antiquity pretty much intact. That means we kept our identity, and it means we are the only people who have never known analphebetism. We were always literate because you cannot be a Jew without being literate. The women were less literate than the men but even they were much more literate than their counterparts elsewhere. Not only the elite knew how to read but every Jew had to read - the whole people, in all its classes and on all levels of giftedness and intelligence."

- I'm not satisfied with your explanation of our false sense of numbers. I agree Jews are highly visible and that we're programmed to look for Jews, but doesn't it also have something to do with the myth of the Jew? There's a fellow on a night talk show who identifies anyone with a European-sounding name as a Jew. He claims he admires Jews but I've always suspected his motives. He can't seem to get off the subject.

The Jew looms large in the unconscious of the western world. The Christian Church was founded within the early synagogue and has never gotten over its need to distinguish its teachings from those of the

Mother tradition. Throughout its history most theological deviations have been damned as Judaizing heresies. The Jew was the strew man set up by the New Testement to make its polemical points. Jews are frequently described as "blind fools" and "lying hypocrites" and their influence is seen as continuing and dangerous.- This in holy writ. No matter how few we were, as the "enemy" we were dangerous to the faith and the faithful; and, as the enemy we became in their conditioning, their unconscious, a powerful force.

- All that's medieval and behind us.

Unfortunately, prejudice can reshape itself in insidious ways; and, contrary to expectations, anti-semitism has continued to thrive in modern non-Christian movements. Many Jews identified anti-semitism with a Christian nerus and felt that the spread of secularism would end this age old scourge. It didn't work out that way. Some Christian communities proved capable of transcending the old myths and Communism to a large degree fell . Secular myths simply repleced or complemented the older religious ones: Jews were now celled a mongrel race, genetically inferior, a diseased lot, spreading subversive ideas and disunity wherever they went. When Czar Alexander II was assassinated in 1880, the Russian government set out to eliminate the Jewish community. Jews were not among the assassins, but they were guilty of being carriers of the "virus" of democratic change. Many still see Jews as the masterminds of a powerful conspiracy against whatever institutions they hold sacred: the Church; white supremacy; the working class; the Third World; Western values.

Whenever privilege was challenged by some group demanding their rightful opportunity, the champions of privilege looked for a Jewish conspiracy. Whenever nationalism emerged the Jew was brended as a cosmopolitan, "fundamentally incapable of understanding the Germen

soul;" the words are by a German academic, Heinrich Paulus. Whenever Marxism raised the banner of revolution against entrenched institutional power, the Jew was branded as a bourgeois creature whose ingrained commercial instinct inevitably turns him into an economic parasite and whose religious ideas are designed to vitiate the awareness of the Jewish poor of the necessity of revolutionary remedies. It was in the most academically advanced state in Europe that, within my lifetime, Jews were branded like cattle and herded like cattle to slaughter houses. Modernity has not abandoned the myth of the Jew as the perennial outsider, the alien in the midst, the poisoner of the wells, the ever-available scapegoat. The unconscious labeling goes on.

- I had a roommate tell me how many Jews sat in the Senate and House of Representatives. I asked him if he knew how many Baptists or Catholics sit in the Congress. He wondered why anyone would want to know. Incidentally, he included in his list quite a few non-Jews.

- But anti-semitic myths aren't a good reason for us to stay Jewish. It was the same young man who had spoken at our opening session of his need for Jewish identification to provide him a positive, transforming experience.

Agreed, but they help to remind Jews about the substance of the Torah's special and surprising message. Franz Rosenzweig often said that the mission of the Jewish people was to remind the world of ideas and values it would rather forget, by insisting that the Bible be read as it is and not after it has been reshaped into another kind of document by the addition of a New Testament or any foreign interpretations. It's surprising how unsettling the Torah can be.

Paul had made it easy for the privileged to legitimatize their roles when he prescribed a high wall of separation between spiritual interests and government; "Render unto Caesar the things that belong to Caesar and to God the things that belong to God," but the Jewish understanding of the Bible gives the lie to all the church-state arrangements that sanctify class and clerical privilege. The Church hierarchy wanted the "proof passages" which presumedly foretold the coming of Christ but didn't want the masses rallying around an Amos or Isaiah's condemnation of all who abused power. During the Middle Ages the imperial church tried literally to lock up the Hebrew Bible lest Christians read and "misunderstand" but the Jew kept these texts alive and when, at the beginning of the sixteenth century, Christians finally read the Old Testament, they discovered ideas of community, justice, and righteousness in tune with their new democratic expectations. Social revolutionaries of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries often cited the Torah's command "to proclaim freedom throughout the land" and the prophetic vision of an earthly Jerusalem, established in justice and prosperity, and challenged on this basis Christianity's supernaturalism, its promise of Heaven, its insistence on deferred gratifications to those who patiently accepted the trial of poverty and peasantry. It is human nature to blame or reward the messenger for the news he brings. In the struggle for political reform those who defended the old order blamed the Jew for the Bible's unsettling and unwanted ideas and prudently sought to quarantine or eliminate the Jew lest he spread spiritual infection.

In sum the Jew was rarely seen as he was and almost always seen as more than he was. This is true even of the occasional flattering interpretations of our role in history. (Flattery itself is a kind of prejudice). The French essayist, Jacques Maritan, described Judaism as "like an activating leaven injected into the mass" whose role is to

teach the world "to be discontented and restless as long as the world has not God." In his view, the Jew represents in a world which is increasingly statist the challenge of individual dissent from the tyranny of consensus, freedom of conscience, and a commitment to practical reform rather than ideology. Such a view is flattering and there is some truth in it, but we must recognize that it remains a symbolic role.

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

The democratic impulse was kept alive among Jews by their daily existence. As a political outcast the Jew naturally identified his political interest with the rebels, revolutionaries, and reformers who sought a larger justice. The powerless are spared the corruptions of power and easily empathize with all who share their marginality.

- But has the Jew made a significant political contribution to the emergence of a just society?

Many have. Jews were heavily envolved in the early stage of European Socialism. One of my ancestors was among the many who were on the side during the liberal revelation of 1848 and who came to America to build here the world of his dreams.

But the maritans of the world were thinking less to individuals like LaSalles and Reva Luxemberg and more of the symbollic role of the Jew in western liberal consciousness.

Jews and non-Jews react to some of the same myths. Both treated mythically and invested with powers which he does not possess. For many Jews and non-Jews the survival of the State of Israel has come to symbolize the struggle of democracy to maintain itself in a world of medieval prejudice and oily power and the right of the few to their own destiny. Neither the Holocaust nor Arab wars have broken this people's incredible will to survive in dignity - which is seen as proof of the potential of the human spirit.

- Isn't this true?

Myths need not be false. In a world full of refugees there are few Jewish refugees and, if Jews can help it, none stay refugees for long. When a Russian Jew arrives in Israel he is given a job and a key to a flat before he leaves the airport. When he arrives in Cleveland he is offered a job, job training and an apartment.

- My parents find Jews and Jewish influence where none exists. I often hear them discuss the Jewish vote and "Jewish power."

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

- If it's as false as you say, where did this 'power' concept come from?

In part from the observable fact that Jews appear on Nobel Prize lists in numbers far beyond what, given our numbers, might have been expected. In part from the kind of conspiracy theories we've been talking about. It's assumed that, if a Jew has office, he'll use it to secure Jewish ends. Jews rarely ask is a Kissinger or a Linowitz good or bad for the causes they hold dear. It's somehow enough to know that one of ours made it.

There's also a bit of theological conditioning at work here. We've already talked about the Biblical doctrine of election, the belief that God chose Israel for a purpose. Deep down in the unconscious of many Jews is the idea that what we do, in some mysterious way, serves God's purposes. It's important and obviously God supports.

- You've lost me.

Unroll a Torah scroll to the sixth chapter of Deuteronomy to the

familiar line which is Judaism's profession of faith - "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God. The Lord is one;" and you'll see, even if you cannot read Hebrew, that the last letters of the first and last words are written double-sized. These letters, ayin - daled - form the Hebrew noun ed which means witness. The ancient scribal tradition exalts the idea that when we recite the Shema we witness to our faith in God and the Torah. A German philosopher of the last generation, Hermann Cohen, put the witness idea this way: Jews offer God their presence in the world, a presence which proclaims God's sovereignty and casts suspicion on all merely human, political, and ideological certainties.

- That's myth talk.

Much of what we do is governed by myth.

The mission theme was first articulated during the Babylonian Exile by a prophet, Deutero-Isaiah, who heard God say that a time would soon be at hand when the exiles would return to Judea and, having acknowledged God's power and authority, would live there as a compelling example to the rest of the world, "a light unto the nations." He spoke of a Judea reborn, organized according to Torah law, providing an illuminating and compelling example to the world as well as security to its citizens: "For out of Zion shall go forth the law and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem." Modern political Zionism is an outgrowth of this vision. The motto of the first pioneers was the Biblical phrase, "Zion shall be built in justice," and Theodore Herzl wrote a utopian novel about the Jewish national home in which he described a progressive social democracy whose institutions would be a model to countries throughout the world.

I should add that Deutero-Isaiah's vision was unique for its time. The spread of religion by the sword, common in pagan religions, gives way here to the theme of conversion through the compelling force of example. Jews lack a tradition which justifies the conversion of the

world by conquest.

The Jews returned to Zion and for half a millenium maintained their state until Rome destroyed the Temple in 70 C.E. Consequent on that defeat, Deutero-Isaiah's mission image was put into mothballs to await the coming of the Messiah; but its emphasis on a gentle universal mission continued to color all Jewish thought. Jews never lived only for the sake of Jews. During the long centuries of dispersion, which Jews call simply galut, the spiritual interests of our mystics focused on the idea that Jewish prayer is essential to the world's deliverance. An accident, so the myth holds, took place at Creation and part of God's being became trapped in the cosmos, caught up in material shells. Only the prayers of Israel, particularly the prayers of the holy and learned, can break open those shells, release the imprisoned light, allow God's being to become whole, and so regain the power which will allow Him to establish the Messianic era. A wounded world could not be healed without the faithful devotion of Jews.

- That's incredible.

All myths are incredible to those who don't believe them; but recognize this myth for what it was, an attempt to explain and give meaning to Jewish experience. Translated into psychological terms, it establishes the ennobling idea that Jews are not another small and impotent people, flotsam tossed about by the cruel seas, but a people whose activities were essential to history. Without our devotion the Messianic Age would never come. A sense of mission draws a group together and gives direction and a sense of thrust to their lives.

In the nineteenth century the mission idea was reshaped to conform to the new spirit of activism. It was transformed into a morally bracing sermon which declared that it is the duty of the Jew, as heir of the prophets, to serve energetically the cause of social and economic

justice. The original idea had been nation focused and based on the power of example. The new theme was focused on the individual Jew as reformer and fashioner of the brave new world.

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

Medieval man had been conditioned to accept patiently the blessings of the World to Come. The nineteenth century was an age of technological progress, sweeping social change, increasing prosperity and a rather innocent confidence in man's ability to transform human society for the better. The modern was impatient with the idea of deferred rewards. The World to Come was here and now or at least given the right political effort would soon be. It was no longer enough simply to be God's witnesses, to hope others would follow the Jewish example. The Jew must take an active leadership role. The mission idea became a call to an active citizenship. The Jew of Frankfort or London proved his loyalty to Judaism as he worked to reshape his community's political and economic structures. To cite various analogies which were favored at the time, the Jew was to be the leaven in the dough, the enzyme in the organism, the catalyst which would precipitate humane social change, one of God's shock troops in the struggle for social justice.

- That's rhetoric.

The commitment of Jews to reform and social change was not simply a matter of words. Social activism, conceptualized as a Jewish mission,

became a hallmark of Jewish life in the late nineteenth century. The recurrent experience of persecution had made the Jew intensely sensitive to injustice. Many of your grandparents and great grandparents were boat people who know what it was to be stateless and forced to flee their homes. As early as 1888 an American rabbi, himself a social reformer, observing the political contours of Jewish life, described "socialism as unquestionably the product of the Jewish spirit." Those folk were conscious of a changing world where one's actions counted and of a tradition where justice was the line. Jewish fund-raising efforts on behalf of refugees and need are legendary. Social work became a significantly Jewish profession. Jews were highly visible in the civil rights movement and the peace movement. The percentage of Jews who vote in the United States is the highest among all religious groups and still today middle-class Jews often vote against their immediate pocketbook interests.

- Didn't they recognize that a minority, and a minority of outsiders at that, couldn't transform the world?

Remember, Jews were accustomed to think of themselves as consequential and were so conceived by non-Jews. The conventional wisdom had it that civilization, then defined as the culture of the West, grew from two sources: the religion of Israel and the philosophy of Greece. Primacy in learning was given to Aristotle, primacy in moral passion was ascribed to Amos. Jews had given to the world the concept of the one God, the Ten Commandments, the hope of immortality and the concept of humanity: "Have we not all one Father? Has not one God created us all?" The sages had chosen the fifty-eighth chapter of Isaiah as a feature Haftarah for Yom Kippur. "This is the fast that I desire: to unlock the fetters of wickedness and untie the cords of lawlessness, to let the oppressed go free; to break every yoke. It is to share your bread with the hungry

and to take the wretched into your home; when you see the naked to clothe him, and not to ignore your own kin." Jews had provided the prophets whose uncompromising sermons on justice were often cited by contemporary reformers. Jews played a leading role in shaping modern culture, Mahler, Freud, Einstein; and in the reform of the old order, Lassale, Marx, Brandeis. This was the age when Jews spoke proudly and wrote voluminously about Jewish contribution to civilization. So many Jews were among the pioneers of nuclear physics that, until they recognized its importance, the Nazis mocked it as Judenphysik. I've often taken some delight in the thought that the Allies won the Second World War because Nazi purges on non-Aryans necessitating the finding of Aryan replacements for the dismissed Jewish scientists delayed the German missile and atomic projects for critical months.

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

Nothing in Marx's writings shows that this man, whose soul was outraged at the institutions which created urban poverty, ever saw or cared about the Jewish poor who shared his squalor and poverty in London. Why Marx was prejudiced against his ancestors I leave to biographers, with the suggestion that the world's tendency to dismiss unwanted ideas as Jewish, and so beneath notice, creates all kinds of complex frustrations in Jews who want to be heard. But I'd also suggest, since the imprint of our environment is indelible, that Marx's intellectual and social concerns, and the bookish way he went about creating his revolution, in some measure reflect the cultural Jewish world his father abandoned.

- I'm still bothered by the rhetoric. Is it really so clear that there would be no one to light the way if Jews weren't around? It may be true that twenty-five centuries ago only Jews insisted on human worth and

human equality. Today, thank God, many thoughtful and concerned groups encourage their followers to reach beyond self-serving political philosophies and social prejudices. Look at Mother Theresa in the slums of India and the volunteers of the Peace Corps and Vista. And nobody did more for justice than Martin Luther King. Many of the most interesting experiments in social democracy have been undertaken in the Scandinavian countries. I wouldn't like to see a world without Jews, we add something to the scene, but surely a world without Jews wouldn't be damned.

I recently had a sabbatical and was able to spend a good bit of time in Asia. Asia includes half the world's population and, outside of Israel, a handful of Jews. The idea of Jews being the catalyst of Asian civilization is on the surface absurd. It is one thing to claim that Jews have been remarkably useful to the world. It is quite another thing to claim that Jews and Judaism somehow are indispensable, that without us social progress grinds to a halt.

There's a prayer in the liturgy which my denomination translates, "Grant us peace, Thy most precious gift, O Eternal Source of Peace, and let Israel be the messengers of peace unto the peoples of the earth." Is any of its sense really lost if <u>the</u> messenger of peace is changed to <u>a</u> messenger? Israel's mission need not preempt any other group's social concerns. There's plenty of work for all. And it bears repeating that Jews did play a role in many European and American liberal and revolutionary programs in numbers disproportionate to their percentage of the population.

- O.K. I accept the idea we talked about earlier, that the Biblical and Talmudic spirit possessed transforming capacity and that they inspired a long-lived and vital tradition, but today these ideas are common property. Christians claim the Bible belongs also to them. The Koran includes Biblical themes. The common law protects the

individual as much as Talmudic law. Isn't the work of a seperate Jewish community over and done?

Torah civilization has never ceased creating new and stimulating forms, nor have other traditions ceased borrowing our ideas. The mosque and most Protestant Churches flattered the synagogue by patterning themselves on its open and democratic structure. Rabbinic Judaism required universal literacy. Study was a religious devotion equal in importance to worship and created, in the second century, the West's first community-wide educational structure - the ancestor of our mandatory educational system. During the Middle Ages Jewish communities became miniature welfare states, complete with institutions which provided funds to bury the indigent dead, ransom captives, provide dowries for poor girls and daily support for poor families, and many a nineteenth-century reformer blueprinted his welfare state after the institutional patterns he saw in the ghetto. In my city, Cleveland, as in many American cities, the concept of a combined Community Chest was developed by civic leaders who were impressed by the way local Jews organized to take care of their own. Just as many of the Protestant leaders of the Enlightenment consulted Hebrew teachers to better understand the Bible, so many social reformers of our day draw on the language and images of the prophets and on the remarkable experiments in community organization represented by the Kibbutzim and Moshavot. To this day the Kibbutzim represent the only communitarian experiments by free peoples which have proved to have staying power and many of their forms have proved seminal. In most scientific and artistic fields you find Jews breaking new ground.

The problem with the mission there is not its purported exclusivity, but the vagueness of its mandate and the narrowness of its view of religious life. What does the speaker, the Jew, mean by justice or righteousness? Glorious words, but justice meant one thing to the self-satisfied German burgher and quite another to his university-educated,

politically radical son. Terms require context. Eighty years ago Theodore Herzl recognized that in the vocabulary of many the mission theme was little more than 'be good, do good,' commonplace. "We must not confuse this application of the word (mission) with that given to it in speaking of those poor monks who set forth for the wild places of the world to carry the Christian gospel to cannibalistic tribes. The Jewish "mission" is something sated, comfortable and well-to-do. . . The missionaries are excellently situated." Not all were, but Herzl's point was well taken.

Many took the mission theme to mean that they served God significantly only as they worked to eradicate racism or to eliminate poverty. The customs and the traditions of the religious life, home observance, synagogue worship, and traditional learning, all that gives beauty and warmth to Jewish life and provides a sense of order in a confused world, came to be seen as inconsequential. Unfortunately the Messianic Age did not arrive. If the world had become an ever peaceful and prosperous place, this might not have mattered; but the mindless tragedy of the first World War exposed the glorious world envisaged by nineteenth century utopians as a mirage. The brave new world was still the same old jungle except that modern men wielded weapons far more dangerous than darts and spears. There is that little red box and all those Dr. Strangeloves. Machines and progress are no longer synonymous. Dachau and Hiroshima drove the final nails into the coffin of the romantic vision that announced the arrival of the age of universal values, inevitable progress, and the brotherhood of men of good will; and Jews again need the warmth of a religious life.

- Last Rosh Hashonah the sermon was on this very theme. My rabbi expressed considerable unhappiness with the return to ritual and customs. He said Jews are abandoning the prophets.

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

To be sure, in some circles, the mission theme led Jews to abandon the synagogue, but in most communities people recognized that there was no inherent conflict between social activism and a discipline's religious life. Social action and a love of ceremony are not mutually exclusive. The wise way is always both/and. I often think of the philosopher, Abraham Joshua Heschel, who was a pious Jew, really a mystic, and one of the leading spirits in the Civic Rights movement in the 1960's. In the Torah, ceremonial and ethical commands are intermingled, "love your neighbor as yourself" and "remember the Sabbath Day" and what is done in the text can be done in life.

- Let's get back to the original question. Why should Jews continue as Jews? Surely there is no purpose in surviving without a purpose.

The value of Jewish survival can be discussed in at least two non-mythic ways. One seeks to discover the actual, rather than the mythic, consequences for the world of our continued existence as Jews; and the other explores the consequences for Jews of being shaped by the Jewish tradition. I've alluded to the first point; this letter is for me the critical one.

I hold that Israel's primary responsibility has been and is to cultivate dignity and justice within Israel. Those who cannot take themselves in hand are not equipped to be the saviors of the world. The far

mystery, the actual way in which Israel's survival is significent, I leave to God. Our sages used to say, "The miracle is not always recognized by the one who is its agent," which I take to mean that our existence as a people has importance, but that God is not about to tell us precisely in what way.

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

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

- But why particularly a 'Jewish' exposure? There's others.

The Torah tradition refracts certain values: a way of life which insists and emphasizes that the soul of each child is precious and that our purpose is to serve God, not the machine, the party or the state.

Our classic texts are biographical and humane rather than scientific and technical. Our class achievements are a sensitive home, a truth-seeking school, and a synagogue searching for God. Our religion is a sanctified way of life, a culture which sets as its goal the disciplined adult, fully informed, spiritually independent, socially compassionate, and morally bound to the commandments of God. Such a culture, if it is seriously pursued, justifies its existence.

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

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

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

I read recently an article by the former chief rabbi of South Africa, an orthodox scholar of unquestioned observance, about the ultra pietists who have made a fetish of ritual and are so distant from the real world that they do not feel bound by the normal duties of any decent citizen. He is, if anything, more dismayed than you are by this mindless emphasis on ritual and concurrent ethical insensitivity to those outside

their world. You wouldn't judge America by our minority of better dead than red jingoists. Don't judge Judaism by those who throw stones at passing cars on the Sabbath, and remember the emotional cost of the Holocaust and the Arab wars and that a relaxed attitude toward ritual is not a guarantee of righteousness.

- Who should I judge Judaism by?

It would be easy to give you quite a list of the great and the well known, but I'd rather you judge our tradition by the Lamed Vaumies. According to folklore, there are always thirty-six saintly, anonymous people raising families, encouraging the anxious, lightening the burden of others.

You're back to 'outside talk'.

My basic argument is that the best answer to 'why keep at it' is that there's no better religious vision around which to wrap your soul, and one bit of evidence for my position is this remarkable record of creativity and decency. It suggests, at the least, that to belong is to join a stimulating culture. My argument remains that, since you must, in any case, open your soul to some religious vision why not take up the Jewish option? It's one of proven worth.

Chapter 5

THE TREE AND THE RIVER

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

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

Yes.
- Then what did my grandfather mean?
~~Our grandfathers were two generations closer to old-world ways.~~

Many had first-hand experience with a Judaism that derived its religious and cultural values from the distant past, consecrated and organized, coherent community, and let them face the future with a confident hope. The rabbinic understanding of the Torah tradition had provided dignity for centuries, and those raised within it had no difficulty defining themselves or their religion. Your grandfather probably hoped you would be proud of your heritage, practice Judaism in the way he knew, and be active in Jewish activities.

In the old world some Jews were pious, others indifferent; some learned and others simple; some fervent and some skeptical; but most everyone took it for granted that there was a definable Jewish way of life. They lived it every day and
If you had a question about Jewish practice you could look up the answer
A little
in one of the manuals like Joseph Karo's Shulhan Aruch (17 c). There were differences, to be sure, on minor points and variant customs,

but for most purposes the text was inclusive and definitive. Today traditional observance still engages many, but others who are non-traditional in their observance would unaffectedly describe themselves as "good Jews." America is a pluralistic society and so is the Jewish community. Orthodox and Conservative congregations celebrate most major holidays for two days; Reform observes only one day. Some Jews keep kosher but rarely attend worship. Others attend services regularly but make no attempt to keep the dietary laws. many have To Convert Judaism before they can live it. There is a Jewish State pioneered by Jews, some of whom would not enter a synagogue of any kind. Either we read out all non-orthodox approaches as misguided and heretical or we accept the fact that our community is no longer of a single mind and that there are significant reasons why various groups have reshaped and are reshaping their understanding of the Torah tradition.

I respect those who believe in and continue to abide by the norms of what historians call the rabbinic tradition, but I do not look at the Torah tradition in the same way they do. The rabbinic tradition claims that God intruded in history at a particular time and allowed Moses to mediate His word. That deposit of tradition, the Torah, they believe to be God's complete and final set of directions for mankind, the only set of Divine Instructions we have. I find this static idea inadequate to our time and, in fact, inadequate as a description of the religious development of the Jewish people. There were prophets after Moses. The Talmudic sages were scholars and some of them were also mystics who "saw" answers or "heard" a bat kol, a voice, tell them how to decide particular problems. In significant ways rabbinic Judaism is an outgrowth from and transformation of Biblical Judaism. The Torah tradition has always been and still is an evolving religious civilization, an outgrowth of the founding insights and of an unceasing exploration and redefinition of them.

- Define Torah.

In its most specific designation Torah describes the scrolls of the Five Books of Moses, Genesis through Deuteronomy, which we keep in the ark. This Torah is read each Sabbath in the synagogue in a year-long cycle, repeated every year. Outsiders are sometimes puzzled that Jews pay so much attention to an antique text; but the ritual is not purely formal. Torah commentary continually draws new meaning out of the text, and that's the process through which the Torah tradition has evolved. Torah comprises all that came to be considered as revealed, the written as well as the oral law, and all serious commentary on that revelation. Many use Torah to signify all Jewish learning. Our people's special and surprising word is stated and examined in Torah.

The word, Torah, derives from a Hebrew root which meant to shoot an arrow. It came to mean to instruct, hence, Torah is God's Instruction. Torah provides a structure for a living community as well as its informing ideas. The familiar Torah text stipulates not only matters of theology - monotheism, covenant responsibility - but practical rules - how much damages are due if a farmer's ox gores his neighbor's cattle. It provides a fabric of meaning as well as a fabric of communal norms and a set of commandments as well as ethical considerations which define the way of life to the community.

- If there is one Torah, how can there be various Judaisms?

You're thinking of Torah as a scroll. The idea that the Torah contains the revelation of the covenant to Moses is the founding and controlling myth, but this myth cannot be taken as a factual description of what actually happened. Critical scholarship has proven that the Mosaic law is indeed a mosaic and that the Torah is an edited anthology of various Israelite traditions. Stop thinking of Torah as a scroll. Think of Torah as a chain of commentary and tradition beginning in the scroll and being shaped and added to in each age, including our own. Think of Torah as a living tradition, and remember that everything that is alive is in the process of change. It was inevitable that the practice and theology of Biblical times grew and changed into the rabbinic tradition and continues to grow and change even in our day. It is inevitable that in times of change there are those who perceive the need and those who hold on to the familiar. Some of us like to stride off into the uncharted and some are more comfortable when they are in familiar surroundings.

Judaism is a dynamic religion which has developed out of the original moment of meeting and out of the reflections and religious experiences of all those to whom that original meeting has remained significant. Our Judaism is not that of Moses. Too much has happened. Looking at all active religion as living systems, I often analogize their transformations to the human being. The image of an adult as simply a larger version of the child he was may seem commonsensical, but, in fact, it's false. The child has immunities absent in the adult and the adult has a musculature and nervous system quite different from the child's. During puberty and adolescence, fundamental physical and emotional changes take place. The red-haired, blue-eyed infant grows into the brown-haired, brown-eyed, sexually active adult.

- I've always thought of Judaism as an entity of fixed shape and doctrine, and I've always felt awkward that I couldn't accept it whole.

You're not alone. Most of the imagery of the prayer book and the holidays suggests an original and constant tradition. Preachers like to talk of eternal verities. When the Torah is returned to the Ark, many congregations recite lines from the Psalms which suggest an immutable Torah: "The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul / the teaching of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple / . . . the word of the Lord is pure, enduring forever."

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

The more traditional-minded look at Jewish history and see a fixed system handed down the generations by an unbroken chain of teachers. But I see change. Over the centuries there have been all kinds of changes in the people's understanding of Torah and many have struggled over each reinterpretation. Twelve hundred years ago a group who came to be called Karaites, who accepted only the authority of the written Torah, charged the Talmudists with having adulterated Moses' law. Today it is the Talmudists who charge Liberal and Conservative Jews with a similar heresy.

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

Modern liberal movements are not the first to read Torah and come to new understandings of its meanings. It's been a ceaseless process. Biblical law permits slavery but limited bondage to six years. Rabbinic teachers made it clear that owning slaves was morally unacceptable. Cities and trade had expanded. Free labor had emerged. A free labor economy was now attainable and the Torah was read, corectly I believe, as a protest against all forms of bondage, and the permission implicit in the old law was quietly discarded.

Slavery is no longer a political problem, but women's rights are. Traditional Judaism separated men and women in the synagogue, forbade a woman to appear as a witness in civil cases, and sanctified sex differentiated roles -- a woman of valor is one who looks well to the ways of her household, I'm quoting the Book of Proverbs, rather than to a career - but the Torah also emphasizes human dignity and contains biographies of women who were liberated for their age: Miriam; Ataliah, a reigning queen; the

prophetess Huldah. Some historians argue that the rather rigid pattern of separation by sex, symbolized by the women's balcony in an orthodox synagogue, represents an understanding of Torah regressively effected by the harem mentality of the oriental world. Certainly there is no rule in the Torah that a woman must be treated as an inferior or limited to housewifely roles; indeed, by a different exegesis, the equality of persons could have been derived from one element of the creation story: "male and female created He them."

- Why wasn't it?

Each generation not only reads out of Torah what is there to be discovered, but reads into Torah its needs and cultural preconceptions. The oriental and medieval worlds were places of rigid differentiation of sexual roles. Think of the veil that many Arab women still wear whenever they appear in public.

- What you say seems self-evident. Why didn't the rabbis who shaped the Talmud recognize that they had changed the shape of Torah?

Since one of religion's major functions is to consecrate values, the drive to declare certain principles and practices fixed for all times is a powerful one. The myth of the Ten Commandments being chiseled onto stone tablets is a highly visual metaphor of this function. A religion isn't compelling or commanding when it's always saying, 'perhaps' or "we'll have to see" or "you must make up your own mind." What the rabbis did was to hide change by insisting that the new material had always been there. They said that there had been two parts to the original revelation. The written Torah was one part. The other was Torah which had not been reduced to writing but had been passed on from Moses through the authorized teachers of each generation and that it was on the basis of this Torah she be'al Peh, oral Torah, that rabbinic Judaism had taken the shape it had.

Rabbinic Judaism conceived of the development of Judaism as an

unfolding process through which even more refined meanings are discovered, but they denied that this process of commentary ever altered the fundamental structure of Judaism. The task of each generation was to apply the principles implicit in the covenant to whatever new situations arose and to spin out a seamless web of commandments and concepts, all solidly based on the original revelation. The rabbinic sages were fond of saying: "turn it [the Torah] over and turn it over again for everything is in it." Nothing was man-made and, therefore, fallible; the way was God's, infallible. Their comments and decisions were simply elaborations of what was either explicit or implicit in the text. An example: the Torah nowhere mentions that a <u>minyan</u>, ten adult males, is required for public worship. Critical scholarship would probably trace the <u>minyan</u> to the customary number required for a quorum in West Asia using ten fingers so even illiterates could tally a quorum. The sages insisted that God had specifically decreed the <u>minyan</u>, and they found a Torah text to prove the point: "how long shall I bear this evil congregation?" In this text God denounces the spies who had warned the tribes not to attack Canaan despite God's command to do so. There were ten such spies, from which it followed that God meant that a congregation should consist of at least ten.

- Why weren't women counted?

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

Such commentary allowed you 'knew' to be Torah without any sense that you were tampering with Torah. If there was no specific text, the letter of the law was allowed to give way to its informing spirit, but without ever denying the law itself. It required a good bit of ingenuity. For example: the Torah requires that all debts be cancelled each sabbatical

year, a rule which attempted to protect poor farmers from falling hopelessly into debt if they suffered several bad harvests. Unfortunately urban society emerged and, as money replaced barter as the basis of trade, this rule became increasingly counter-productive. Yesterday's reforms are often today's political headaches. As the remission year, the seventh year, approached, interest rates would rise often past the point where farmers could afford to borrow money for seed or merchants purchase goods for trade. More harm was done by this rule than help afforded, so in the first century it was circumvented by carefully crafted legal devices written to safeguard the letter of Torah law and, at the same time, permit debts to run through the year of release. Those who created these legal fictions were careful to make it appear that the Torah law was being upheld for, after all, it was the sense of Torah being a constant and sanctified which gave the Torah tradition its authority. The simple truth is that, like it or not, institutions which do not change petrify and die, and ideas which are not rethought and reshaped become irrelevant.

- Your process emphasis is a difficult one to become comfortable with.

I know, and for that reason I've begun to move away from using the familiar label, Judaism. It suggests a fixed set of ideas and practices constant over time. Instead, I've begun to use the term Torah tradition which more accurately suggests the process of ongoing commentary on the original themes.

- Please, back to square one. How can I jew if you can't tell me what is involved?

- Another voice: You've called us a community of fate. That I understand. Given your approach, if we're also a community of faith, what do we share beyond anti-semitism and Israel?

I never know how to answer a question that begins: what does

Judaism believe about. . . I can answer: this is the way things were organized in Biblical times and this is the approach taken in rabbinic times, and this is what I think. To talk in terms of process, development, growth, and the unfolding of a religious tradition, the only way I can deal with religious questions is to rule out a once and final definition.

When Karo prepared his encyclopedic manual, the political and cultural circumstances of Jewish life were everywhere medieval, so, although there were saintly Jews and ~~evil~~ Ibn Ezra ones, learned men and illiterates, Jewish life everywhere ~~reflected~~ to essentially similar cultural and economic conditions and the Torah tradition had everywhere essentially the same shape, ~~even though there were differences.~~ In ~~medieval Europe monogamy was the rule while in Yemen and Persia~~ a modest ~~form of polygamy was assumed to be right and proper.~~ No longer. Karo's Some Jews ~~live in a Jewish State, some live freely in their diaspora communities, others live under serious restraints.~~ had only Their Judaism Each year I discuss with my Confirmation class the concept of religion. Once they understand religion functionally, as we've talked about it, I ask them a question which would have been meaningless in a ghetto community: list the religions which have affected your lives. By then they realize that America's civil religion has played and continues to play a major role with them and that their controlling sense of purpose is derived at least as much from the social sciences and liberal arts as from Torah and Talmud. ~~Put another way,~~ Our understanding of Torah necessarily has been transformed by the intellectual currents which shape us. Can you be surprised that Rabbi Silver looks at the Torah quite differently from Rabbi Karo?

I am a rabbi. I am committed to the Torah tradition and I agree with many traditional rabbinic positions on God, practice, and values; yet, when I read the various modern texts which purport to describe

Judaism, I often find myself vigorously shaking my head. I would balance some ideas differently and they present as Torah other ideas that I don't accept. Is this heresy? Not at all. I'm not a maverick. When I was ordained I was not required to affirm a particular catechism nor have I at any time been told to submit my writings to a superior's censorship. The promise that I was asked to make on that beastly hot June day was that I would confront Torah with love and respect, with the respect of one who was at home within its spirit and the love of one who felt close to the whole Torah family.

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

The image is an attractive one for those who draw encouragement from the idea of eternal verities for, according to the image makers, the tree had retained its original shape. But I question this metaphor's usefulness as a description of what actually occurred. Imagine Moses resurrected among us and on a visit to the most traditional synagogue in the area. Ask yourself what his reaction would be to what he would see and hear of the religion he helped to found. Synagogues developed a thousand years after Moses's death. The first rabbi was ordained more than thirteen hundred years after Moses anointed Aaron as High Priest.

If I took Moses to the Ark and opened the scroll which bears his name, he could not read it. The Torah script, though antique, uses an alphabet which was developed several centuries after his death. Nor would he recognize the scroll itself since the Torah did not achieve its present form until after the Babylonian Exile. [Neusner 97 - 100]

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

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

The Torah's text continues to provide the calendar and many of the

idioms of Jewish life. Specific holidays and the Sabbath are mandated by the Torah, but we celebrate them differently than the ancient Israelites did and we interpret Torah language to other purposes. The past has force. The current flows in one direction, but it is a Torah which speaks to our needs and interests to which we respond. I remember being shocked when I took my first university course in Bible and a noted scholar described the Israelite religion to us. I had thought of Biblical Judaism as much like my own. It was not. My Torah is the product of three thousand years of sensitive living and commentary, not the early first millenium text which my teacher outlined for me.

We are not the first generation to be aware that we no longer understand the Torah as our ancestors did. The second-century sage, Akiba, insisted that not only every sentence and phrase had meaning, but every letter, and even the white space around the letters. A <u>midrash</u> of the time describes Moses' hearing of Akiba's fame, visiting one of his lectures, and being utterly puzzled by interpretations of Torah which were completely foreign to him. Modern interpretations are not the first to mark a radical break with rabbinic understandings which had been accepted for centuries. We've already remarked on the fact that the Torah stipulates capital punishment for a variety of crimes but rabbinic law discouraged it. The rabbis did not stop teaching the old law; but they refined the concept of due process so as to sharply limit a person's exposure to the death penalty; and they were so successful in their organization of the judicial process that it came to be said that a rabbinic court which carried out a death sentence in a century was a murderous court.

Just as the American Constitution is subject to various kinds of interpretations, some strict, some loose - and many Supreme Court decisions hang by a constitutional hair, each judge basing his decision

as much on his understanding of the spirit of the law as on its letter - so Jewish life has been inconsistently consistent. Kabbalists have read into the Torah incredible descriptions of God's nature. Messianists found in Torah the exact date of the final judgment. Philosophers discovered the Aristotelian categories.

Gershom Sholem has defined the quintessential Jewish activity as Talmud Torah, as the process of commentary on the original revelation, as the search for unexpected wisdom and we continue the search because it continues to be productive. A Jewish service, unlike say a Quaker meeting, is not an expectant silence, as the worshippers await inspiration, but Talmud Torah, reading, commentary, an exploration of a multi-faceted tradition. Some religious traditions change over time as the inspired bring new words. Once the Torah was published, it was not to be amended; so Judaism has emphasized progressive and inspired commentary rather than progressive revelation.

- But today's changes are radical ones. I keep thinking of how my grandfather would have reacted to a woman rabbi or a bare-headed congregation.

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

Blame Dr. Einstein. We can no longer think conceptually without taking into account the fourth dimension - time, and the element of time

forces us to question all claims to immutability. Until quite recently philosophers were confident that such concepts as justice, freedom, and duty could be truly and finally defined; and, once defined, such formulations could be applied to all situations. Today the dimension of time, the perspective of the observer, must always be considered and dialectical thought has replaced fixed systems. We move in a world governed by the concepts of development and dialectical process.

Unless we are prepared to cavalierly override all the norms of critical discourse and content ourselves with the argument that religion alone, among human activities, is impervious to the flow of life, the only way we can intelligently discuss religious faith is to discuss it as a process. We have seen that rabbinic Judaism insists that, though the revelation is full and known, for the Torah exists, yet man's comprehension of revelation is never complete. The essential and unceasing Jewish activity is commentary, the exploration of Torah which allows the explorer to plumb new depths. It was a conviction of the rabbis that, were Jews to study the Torah until the Messiah comes, they would not understand it all, so one of the tasks the folklore assigned Elijah when he announces the coming of that worthy is to resolve the moot points that have escaped our ingenuity and learning.

- But what about revelation? Did God give Moses the Torah?

When a craftsman throws a pot and then bakes it in a kiln, the clay is transformed from an idea into an object which exists independently of the potter. Some compare the Torah to such a pot. They seem to think that God dictated the Torah scroll and that it now exists apart from God. That's not my understanding. God cannot be separated from His word. Torah is not an object independent of God but the word of God continually emerging and dependent on Him. God and His Torah and we and God's Torah are always in a dialectic relationship.

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

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

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

The Jew says easily: 'This is the Torah which Moses received from God on Mount Sinai.' The Christian affirms that God sent down His only son to take on Himself the world's sins and that the record and meaning of Christ's mission is recorded in the gospels and in Paul's letters. The Muslim insists that the angel Gabriel brought Mohammed the Book of Revelation and that the Koran represents a true copy of God's book in God's own language.

- What about the truth claim?

I understand why you're uncomfortable when I suggest that our special and surprising word may not be the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. One of the virtues of any religion is that it confirms a value system. We gamble our lives on that confirmation and want to feel that it's a sure bet. Anyone who teaches an undergraduate survey course in religion knows that each year some students will go through a crisis of faith when they learn that modern research takes for

granted that the Torah was not given to Moses in its present form or that the Gospel documents were written and edited long after the events they purport to describe; in brief, that the truth is not what they were taught in Sunday School.

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

Truth comes from a vocabulary of fixed terms which are now denied to us. Modern philosophy suggests that the only truths of whose accuracy we are certain are those which apply to systems which are our own creations, like mathematics. When we deal with nature and human nature, which are God's creations, we can describe process, 'how', but we can't explain purpose, 'why'. Our truths are at best partial explanations. We will never be able to exhaust all aspects of reality. I find the Torah tradition sensitive, suggestive, wise. It offers me important hints about the mystery we call reality, but it does not reveal to me the whole truth.

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

Not really. Almost every decision we make involves a judgment call and is in that sense a risk. Risk adds excitement to life. In many ways not knowing the whole truth is better for us. At least, God must have thought so since He built denial mechanisms into our psyches.

People who believe they possess the truth inevitably ascribe the beliefs of others to congenital incapacity, invincible ignorance, or the work of Satan. When 'truth' enters a society, bitterness and division inevitably come in its train. Many heads have been bloodied because of the claims to absolute truth advanced by various religions.

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

Worship seeks to set a confirmatory mood. We need to feel the validity of Torahic ideas before we'll set on them, but Jewish thought was ever conscious of another text in Deuteronomy which I've already quoted to you: "My thoughts are not your thoughts, says the Lord." Any formulation by us of Torah is at best tentative.

To suggest, as I have, that the Scripture is not literally true is not to argue that its themes are false or have been deceitfully proposed. I marvel at the Torah's continuing ability to refract ideas of transforming power, ideas which entered a people's consciousness at a particular time and affected, and continue to affect, the lives of millions. Sophisticates of a generation ago tended to dismiss talk of revelation as the invention of priests or the delusions of fanatics, but our generation has rediscovered the sources of perception and insight which lie behind and beyond reason. We acknowledge sources of understanding which are lodged in the imagination and in the unconscious rather than in the rational intellect. An artist paints with his imagination, his soul, as much as with his mind. We have learnt that those 'truths', what I've been calling the "special and surprising words", can transform a society and that they emerge from the deep well of inspiration rather than from the limited range of logical thought.

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

There you go again with that term. How do you know if a masterwork is true? You don't, but you can know, either by instinct or by the cultivation of aesthetic taste, that it's a major piece. The same test applies to religion. There's no way of saying: My theology is true and yours is false. A tradition's truth is attested by that society's

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instinctive agreement. Instinctively we knew the Torah to be a master-piece, and we confirm our assumption by tracking its record over time.

I like to use words like perception, insight, heightened consciousness which are not so imperious in their implications as truth and verity and allow me to appreciate the spirit and the mind of those who do not share my beliefs. Perception and insight are not necessarily limited to one religion any more than Shakespeare's or Beethoven's genius exhausted the possibilities of great literature or grand music. I prize my Torah experiences and have been ennobled by them, but, since I don't claim that they exhaust all truth, I can see other religions as offering an inspiring vision.

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

We can't redo what has been. There is no reason to. Torah is a continuum not a conclusion. Moreover, no one can self-consciously write a scripture. However noble the thoughts, it would end up being a book of fine themes, but not Torah. Books of Scripture have something divine, a special compelling power about them, the power that transforms a society. The rabbis said <u>Torah Orah,</u> the Torah is an unceasing source of light which has the remarkable and mysterious ability to continue to shed enlightenment.

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

The investigations of Freud, Jung, Eliade and a host of others have helped us see that our fathers were wrestling with the limitations of language when they said unself-consciously: "Thus says God." How else express their certainty that they had seen what they had not known before? How else express the rush of certainty which cleared up confusion? After a first course in Biblical criticism, I was ready to

dismiss Scripture as an antiquated collection of myths and legends. It was Martin Buber who taught me to see Torah as the record of a series of meetings between Israel and God during which our fathers opened themselves fully to the mystery of the divine and apprehended something of that mystery. Though they described the experience with words, "and God spoke", 'this is the vision of. .', what they experienced could not really be expressed. How often have you worried over a decision and thought you had put it out of your mind only to find that the pieces came together when your conscious mind was busy with another problem. The prophets were not babblers who, in some drugged haze, said anything that came into their minds, but sober and responsible citizens who puzzled long and hard over the conditions of their lives and discovered sometimes to their own amazement that the pieces came together in an unexpected vision. Revelation is not an invention of crafty priests designed to discourage the laity from asking too many questions, but a word which describes a people's surprise at some unexpected and powerful insights into the human condition.

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

I believe there is an informing spirit in the Torah but I'm speaking of a far more sophisticated interpretive process than abstracting a few high-sounding terms and declaring them to be the whole of God's word. Torah commentary implies a respect for the text itself and careful examination of all its implications. Traditionally, this approach was called <u>midrash</u> and <u>midrash</u> is based on faith in Torah as the living word of God.

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

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

Midrash was published by a process of accumulation and little attempt was made at systematic editing. The Torah tradition has no problem with interpretive inconsistency. Variety of interpretation reinforces the idea that the Torah is infinitely suggestive, in that sense special, surprising, mysterious, divine. These inconsistencies simply reveal that each of us looks on Torah with his own eyes and mind; we are inconsistent, not God.

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

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

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

A little over a hundred years ago Samson Raphael Hirsch, Zacharias Frankel, and Samuel Hirsh, German Jews and fine scholars, each wrote a book defining the essence of Judaism. Samson Raphael Hirsch defended the

Orthodox tradition. Zacharias Frankel advocated slow, deliberate change. Samuel Hirsh championed radical reform. Each said some interesting things about the nature of the Torah tradition, but an outsider reading these three books would have wondered if they were describing the same religion. Each saw what he was prepared to see, and none succeeded in defining any objective criteria which would enable another researcher to arrive at his conclusions.

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

Let me illustrate the point. Perhaps you have heard people say that Judaism is this-worldly in its orientation. Many Jews are of the impression that Christianity is concerned with Heaven and such things and Judaism is not. But the traditional liturgy blesses God as "reviver of the dead", medieval Jewish sermons breathed a good bit of hell-fire-and-damnation, and rabbinic literature routinely describes this world as

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

Another related example. Many modern Jews like to think of the Torah tradition as appreciative of our physical as well as spiritual natures and as applauding love and sex as natural. The Torah, they claim, and correctly so, does not mandate celibacy or regimens of denial or monasticism, and they contrast this position favorably to religions which encourage ascetic devotions. None of the Torah's commandments specifically require any form of asceticism or mortification. They are quick to point out that marriage was treated as Kiddushin, a sanctification; and the rabbis generally looked on physical intimacy as one of life's blessed joys. But this is not the whole story. During Biblical times there were Nazirites and the Rechabites, itinerant holy men, who did not cut their hair, drink wine, live in cities, or wear ordinary clothes. During Greco-Roman times the Essenes and the Yahad conventicle of Qumran, now famous as the Dead Sea Scrolls community, built wilderness monasteries where they practiced strict austerities. Hasidim of the 11eventh and twelfth century bathed in cold rivers and endured long vigils. Maimonides echoed Paul in arguing that sex ought to be engaged in as infrequently as

possible. Throughout the Middle Ages the Kabbalists encouraged fasting and mystical exercises. Some of the Hasidic rebbes and Muser leaders of Eastern Europe followed a regimen of vigils and regular fasts. Any number of medieval manuals were published describing a way of denial which leads to holiness. Asceticism was not the Torah tradition's major theme but, clearly, it was not an inconsequential or heretical one.

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

- A complaint: You talk as if change inevitably leads to progress. I'd hardly call the rabbinic attitude towards women an improvement over the Biblical approach. How do we know that today's changes are for the better?

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

Chapter 6

THINK BOLDLY - BUT THINK

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

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

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

A generation ago most Jews lived in a Jewish environment, 'jewing' came naturally and the religious school simply explained the Jewish world that the child was living in and gave him the tools to take full advantage of its activities. Today's child grows up in a fragmented environment. His home is a middle-class place, an American place, a television place, public school place, as well as a Jewish place. His parents may be deeply committed but their commitment may be entirely civic and the child may not recognize that board membership in a social agency is a form of 'jewing.' His world is the public school and Little League as well as Sabbath School. Unless the religious school provides a Sukkah or Havdalah, he may never taste their flavor and color. As a result, many young Jews think of the Torah tradition as a set of disembodied ideas which seem to have no immediate relationship to their lives, and a few rituals which hardly seem worth all the fuss.

There is an old saw that faith is caught, not taught. In matters spiritual the heart rules the head. One powerful experience that touches the heart is worth countless explanations.

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

- I went to a small college in a small town. There were few of us and my roommate tried to convert me. I'd never been challenged before. Defending myself, I discovered I really cared.

Commitment is essential to religious involvement. Comprehension is not. I teach in the Department of Religion of a local university and, as you would expect, my courses focus on Judaism. Ministers and nuns have been among my best students. Their previous training heightened their ability to assimilate theological ideas and to put them into perspective. I hope they have gained some appreciation of the Torah tradition, but I'm sure that nothing they learned changed their basic loyalties nor did I intend it to.

I took out a copy of <u>The Jewish Catalogue</u> I happened to have in my briefcase.

A few years ago a group of folk from the <u>havurah</u> movement published this volume which they described as "a do it yourself kit," designed to open options for personal Jewish creativity and contemporary utilization of the rites and rituals of Jewish life." Forgive them the jargon. What they offered and what people eagerly accepted - the book's sale was a minor publishing phenomenon - was a step-by-step guide to writing your own <u>ketubah</u>, baking <u>matzah</u>, or molding a <u>kiddush</u> cup. Here was a way to do Jewish things rather than to have them done for you; and the authors argued effectively that such experiences are generally the

first step in developing religious awareness.

The success of The Jewish Catalogue was a fascinating phenomenon for many reasons, not the least of which was that it seemed to signal the end of an era during which the Torah's presumed reasonableness and the social value of its commandments were held to be major selling points. Rabbis of a generation before mine praised the dietary laws as a primitive but effective means of controlling food-transmitted diseases. They described the Sabbath day as the world's first labor law. Yom Kippur's annual spiritual examination was equated with the annual physical. They argued that the mitzvot were utiliterian and that, therefore, it was a reasonable decision to be involved with Jewish practice.

- If the commandments are purely practical and functional, why should anyone keep them up when there are up-to-date techniques which would achieve better results? Why do you need the Sabbath in a society where the five-day week is commonplace?

The answer is that you don't and that the commandments are not purely utiliterian rules. The dietary laws may have helped Jews avoid certain intestinal problems, but surely modern food inspection programs are broader in scope and more effective.

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

- Is this what you meant when you spoke about each religion's separate and surprising message?

In part. The Sabbath remains the Sabbath, a religious obligation, even for those who live in a society which operates with a forty-hour week. It defines "jewing." In the Middle Ages some philosophers divided the Biblical commandments between those of obvious social function - leaving the gleanings for the poor - and those social benefits could not be explained - the prohibition of wearing a garment woven of various threads; but all thinkers agreed that any explanation of our laws did not exhaust their intent. Life needs form and holidays and rituals provide structure.

- Are you saying that it doesn't matter what the rules are?

Not at all. The philosophers found social utility in most of the laws. I'm arguing that the law exists because of its social benefit and because one of the ways religion orders our lives is by providing guiding forms.

- Are you saying that inexplicable rules are better than the reasonable ones? I won't do what doesn't make sense.

But you do. We all do. Birthdays, memorials, courtesies, the way we set a table, the day we chose for Thanksgiving. Every person, family culture and religious tradition must have its own identity, form, a name, a special feel. There's a value to the national anthem before a ball game and to the conventional courtesies though there is no reason a song of a greeting must have the form it has. I'm simply repeating what Proverbs suggested long ago: "The heart has reasons of which the mind is ignorant."

I returned to the river metaphor. There are three ways to see a river: from a spacecraft, from the river bank or as a swimmer from water level. From space you can look across the whole sweep of Jewish history. The outline of the river is clearly defined but you can't pick up any sense of the speed of the current or the details of the vegetation on its banks. You can see pretty well but you aren't able to touch or smell

or hear.

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

The swimmer sees only a few yards in each direction but he is alive to the river. He feels the current pull him along and finds the water refreshing against his body. The Jewish Catalogue is a primer for those who want to learn to swim. It's a 'how to' book that leaves abstractions on the shore.

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

Religious commitment is like love. If you were to make a list of requirements for an ideal mate and happen to find someone who fits the description, you wouldn't necessarily fall in love with that peregon. Feelings cannot be forced. Love surprises us. Sometimes we're introduced to someone and we know right off that we won't work well together. We say that the chemistry was wrong. It's not a chemical problem, of course, but that our emotions follow their own logic.

- I'm a holiday freak. I like being with the family at a Seder table: the food, the songs, hiding the Afikomen. I get a kick when I rattle off "who knows thirteen" without looking at the book or taking a breath; so I can appreciate what you've been saying about the binding quality of the rites. But I don't think I'd care as much about the holidays if they were just happenings. I've been to a number of youth

group camps and experienced friendship services which were full of feeling. I've heard many say, 'I'd like to be closer to Judaism'; but emotions are fugitive. When they got home, it was back to the old distance. I find it's the ideas that bring me back. Seder night, the Haggadah always starts me thinking about spiritual as well as physical bondage and about the difference between "freedom from" and "freedom for" and I await those thoughts with some eagerness.

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

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

- I have problems with your emphasis on feeling, imagination and ritual. I guess it's because my rabbi told us that Judaism is the only religion that doesn't require you to believe anything unreasonable.

I wonder. Generally the Torah does not glorify unreason. God, Himself, Isaiah repeated, approached Israel with an appeal to logic, "Come now, let us reason together," but you'd agree, I'm sure, and I think your rabbi would, too, that faith takes us beyond the evidence and common sense.

- Why did he say it then?

He's a Westerner and university trained, and that culture began a love affair with reason as long ago as the seventeenth century when Voltaire and his friends insisted that all forms of privilege and arbitrary authority were unreasonable and Newton and his friends showed how clear reasoning about the universe could help us gain mastery over nature.

The benefits were clear to see, political freedom and widespread prosperity, and many well-educated Westerners came to believe that reason and research would solve mankind's problems and usher in a Golden Age. For them reason became the focus of a new religion, the university its sanctuary and the research scientist the high priest who served at the altar. But reason proved a willful god. Many of the long-term consequences of the Age of Reason now seem to us fairly grim: population explosion, environmental pollution, the routinization of work, the depersonalization of life in urbanized mass society, the living death of protracted senility. There was a price to pay for every bit of progress. Mines leave scars in the earth. Factories belch smoke and dirty the sky. Science created new forms of energy which fuel new and deadlier forms of destruction. We broke down older patterns and could not agree on new ones. In the name of reason we asked a lot of questions only to find that there were no answers to many. We know so much that we no longer know what is right, where to go, or how to get there. The future is no longer what it used to be.

Today we think of reason, not as a god, but as the sorcerer's apprentice. The Jewish version of that medieval legend uses as its protagonist a brilliant scientist-Talmudist, Loewe of Pregue, a friend of Johannes Kepler, who, so it is said, discovered the Kabbalistic formules by which a clay statue, a golem, could be brought to life. When the Prague ghetto was preyed on by roughnecks, Loewe used his knowledge to create a golem to protect the aged and the women. He shaped the clay. He whispered the incantations. He placed a seal bearing the magical name of God on the statue's forehead, and the golem came to life. The toughs soon got a taste of their own medicine, but in time the golem ran amok and Loewe had to speak the magical words which returned his automaton to clay.

Reason seems to have run amok. Hitler's professors helped to

destroy the mystique which shrouded men of reason and their halls of ivy. Think Tank specialists who compute how many millions will die during an initial atomic attack commend fear rather than respect. There is deep mistrust of the trained mind seperate from a sensitive heart. Some of the most popular movements of our generation represent attempts to get in touch with feelings and sensibilities, to develop spiritual resources and strengthen our moral sensitivities. The soul and our imaginative and emotional powers are looked on as untapped resources. There's talk that our imaginative and ethical capacities were neglected during our long love affair with reason. This change of outlook underlies the new interest in the human potential movement and the renewal of interest in religious practice.

- Rituals can't solve our problems.

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

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

Not at all. As an old water safety instructor I know how important it is to make sure you are swimming under control and in a safe stretch. The Torah tradition rarely glorifies unreason. The commentator, Abraham ibn Ezra wrote: "Reason is the mediating angel between God and man." Maimonides taught that God's decision, as reported in Genesis, "Let us make

man in our likeness," referred to the endowment of reason. The animal reacts instinctively and responds in the way his nervous system is programmed; the human being reflects and considers. Thinking is the process that defines our humanity.

I've argued that prudence, patience and principle in about equal measure are the only ways to enhance the quality of life in a free society and I see no reason to retract that argument now. The Torah tradition's goal is the sanctification of life. Israel is to be "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." Prophetic outrage at injustice, Amos thundering against the spoiled and callous folk of his day, has always played a role in Israel's program of social regeneration; but so have the less dramatic responsibilities of training up a child in the way he should go, creating social welfare institutions of all types, and the disciplining of one's own lusts and greed: "Sanctify yourself and then seek to sanctify others." There's wisdom in the old saying: don't rush the Messiah. Don't let your passions push you out of control.

- There are Jewish fanatics. You've spoken of those who stone the cars that pass near Meah Shearim on the Sabbath.

To be human is to be prone to excess. The question is not whether we have a few fanatics but whether Judaism encourages or sets up safeguards against unbridled zeal. The Torah, I submit, is cautionary. "Do not be righteous overmuch!" Man is not God. The tradition has built-in checks and balances. Rabbis were accorded only that authority which the community felt their erudition and character deserved and no one spoke <u>ex cathedra</u>, for God. Authority lay with a scholarly consensus and not with the opinion of a single man. God alone enjoyed uncontested authority, all other authority was derivative.

The nineteenth century chose sides and over-valued reason. I'm a both/and person. Jews found themselves for the first time in the

capitals of European culture, going to concerts and lectures, and enjoying the experience. Culture was associated with cool and judicious behavior. Hitlahavut, intensity, was associated with the unwashed Hasidic hillbillies of Eastern Europe and was seen as a sign of backwardness. The emancipated Jew joined a society which believed that the trained mind could solve all problems. It was an innocent, happy thought and profoundly wrong.

Their confidence in laboratory and library was misplaced. Reason provided prosperity and longevity and some unexpected byproducts: the population explosion, pollution, the dreariness of the assembly line, the rape of the world's energy reserves and natural resources.

Our generation has lost faith in technology as the Messiah, Jews along with everyone else; but reason also failed us in a more immediate and personal way. Reason was the reason we believed Emancipation would work. Once the walls of the ghetto came down, our neighbors would see that we didn't have horns and had the same needs and hopes as they did. Experience and facts would bring about the demise of anti-semitism. It didn't happen that way. For some that faith was shattered by the Dreyfus trial or the Russian pogroms or when Jewish revolutionaries were denounced to the Tsar's police by their Communist comrades. Some held the dream until Kristalnacht and Stalin's purges. For others the turning point came when the British issued the White Paper of 1939 which closed Palestine's doors to Jews or when during the war the Allies convened the Evian and Bermuda Refugee Conferences, not to save Jews, but to still the protests of those who demanded that Hitler's victims be saved. For the last diehard reality set in as mosques rang with cries of jihad, holy war, Arab armies went again and again into battle against Israel and the United Nations transformed itself into a P. L. O. propaganda meeting. Speak only one name, Auschwitz, and Jews understand. A pervasive

sense of alienation and of the tragic binds our experience into a single mental set. The times are cold. Names like Coventry, Hiroshima, Czechoslovakia, Vietnam speak volumes to almost everyone. Jews are not the only ones who need not only the bracing command to seek justice and the strengthening of a congregation that sings together against the darkness.

I sometimes characterize the pervasive cultural changes which we've been talking about by calling the earlier attitude Maimonidean and ours Ha-levian. Moses Maimonides was a towering intellect, master of all the rabbinic disciplines and a firm believer in the redemptive power of reason. Judah ha Levi was a poet of sensitive heart and passionate feelings, a philosopher who was willing, indeed eager, to acknowledge reason's limits.

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

Maimonides wrote prose, brilliant analyses which awe the reader with their analytic precision and logical acumen. He provided sophisticated answers to sophisticated questions, but had little time for the simple needs and confessions of ordinary folk. He defended Jewish interests at the governor's court, he was that official's personal physician; but he did so by quiet representation and not by angry remonstration. I

simply cannot imagine Maimonides in an unbuttoned shirt, sitting cross-legged at a campfire, holding hands with friends while they sing an endless series of Hebrew folk songs. The Maimonidean spirit, like the spirit of American Jews until a generation ago, was critical, wide-ranging in its interest, elitist, dignified, uneasy with emotion, pleased that the Torah tradition was reasonable, high-minded, and wise.

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

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

Maimonides justified Judaism by showing that its teachings corresponded to the philosophic - concepts scholars then accepted as

reasonable. Ha Levi struggled to show Judaism as a distinctive reality and he judged its teachings by their impact on each living Jew rather than on their logical consistency. My point is that the times have made Halevians of most Jews. A recent survey of Jewish attitudes stated as its major finding the measurement of a deeply felt need for community. Jews want the synagogue to be a place where the loneliness of modern life can be overcome and its anxieties mastered.

- Then it has to become a less formal place.

It already has. Young Jews have shul-ins. Parents arrange Sabbath dinners to learn the songs which they can sing with their children around their own table. The prayer book of liberal Jews who once minimized the value of ritual now refers to customs as mitzvot, sacred acts. You're here at this Institute. I'll give you another measure of the mood shift. The popularity of Fiddler on the Roof. The shtetl was poor, full of misery and cruelty, a bleak place, not the Paradise Lost of the stage play; but its intimacy and color offer a sharp contrast to the dismal urban sprawl in which we lead our fragmented lives, so to many the shtetl seems eminently attractive and, incidentally, attractive to many non-Jews. Fiddler played to packed houses all around the world. Community is a common need.

- I was taught in religious school that Judaism could be defined as ethical monotheism: the affirmation of the oneness of God and of the centrality of ethical living. You seem to be downgrading these core elements.

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

and related to the tradition's special and surprising message.

Religions are born, preserved and perpetuated by communities. Judaism is a way of life, not a denatured set of ideas. To abstract the teachings from the living community always and necessarily diminishes the area and scope of the cluster of ideas, rites, hopes, institutions and myths which are part of that religion's pattern. Those who tend to toss pristine labels around often end up with labels and little else. Conditioning or habit keeps them going as Jews for a while, but soon it's the media and the values of their class which shapes their spirit rather than the teachings of the Torah. Unfortunately, they are not very precise.

The medieval tradition was developed by a people set apart and, of necessity, it turned in on itself and became encrusted with countless customs and folkways, not to speak of any number of superstitions. The modern tendency to reduce Judaism to a simple definition, ethical monotheism or prophetic Judaism, was intended to bring essentials back into focus, but it cut too deeply and made all custom and ceremony seem irrelevant. The defining of Torah by such conceptual tags raised many problems. What specific code of ethics was implied? You say justice and righteousness. Words like justice and righteousness are big, bold and vague. They're golden words, but, as Mycenes discovered, gold is indigestible. Human problems are many-sided and simple programs simply will not solve complex problems. Told to build freeways, engineers did; and their miles of asphalt and concrete split communities and destroyed much of the sense of neighborliness which had made our cities liveble. Every ethical decision must be to some degree contextual. Tags like righteous and justice encouraged the well-intentioned to rush in before they fully understood what is at stake. Commitment ultimately is necessary, but so is judgment. There was value in the case-by-case method of analysis used by the rabbis in their response as they examined a problem from all sides

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

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

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

That's certainly part of what I've been saying. At some point we have to commit ourselves to values and causes we cannot completely analyze.

- Is that what people mean when they talk of a leap of faith?

Some of them. Unfortunately, others glorify commitment for its own sake and look on prudence and judgment as unwarranted inhibitions. They say get engaged. It's exhilarating. I'm enough of a Maimonidean to be

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frightened by any philosophy which assumes commitment to be in and of itself a good. I want to feel that the river I'm diving into won't sweep me away. There are an awful lot of people committed to life-destroying messages and suicidal movements. Synagogues get bombed by committed people. We're back to arguing with Kierkegaard's unstinting praise for Abraham's mind-boggling loyalty. An uncritical glorification of faith can lead us to serve devilish masters. I need only say one word: Nurenberg, and you'll know what I mean. A car needs both accelerator and brakes; and we need an open heart and a critical mind. Commitment and judgment must go hand in hand.

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

Withdrawal and asceticism have played a role in the Torah tradition; but Judaism did not declare living in a monastery or taking vows of celibacy to be marks of a special holiness. Most rabbis lived at home,

married, had children, worked at an ordinary occupation, and were distinguished by their knowledge of Torah rather then by an arduous discipline of denial. We had ascetics who wore hair shirts and bathed in the cold rivers, and mystics who fasted and meditated, hoping for a mystic vision of God; but for the most part these did not command reverence unless they were also men of Torah - trained minds who busied themselves a good part of the day with affairs of the community. The prophetic message was judged by its contents, not by the fact that it had been brought by a holy man who spoke as if possessed. An ecstatic who babbled was a babbler, not a prophet.

When you look at the broad outlines of Jewish thought you discover that it tends to reject either/or decisions in favor of a both/and attitude: both the cultivation of the mind and the cultivation of the soul. "Take hold of this thought but do not leave go of its opposite." Not total abstinence but drink in moderation and sing the Kiddush. Piety is important but family responsibilities must be discharged: "If you have a sapling in your hand and someone calls out: 'Lo, the Messiah comes, plant the sapling first and then go to meet him.'" Some people see every decision as between black and white; they are either/or puritanical types. Others see a wide range of possibilities and consequences, many shades of gray. We're both/and people, or at least our tradition encourages us to be, both community and autonomy; both wisdom and imaginative commitment; both mind and spirit. Materialism and greed are condemned as sins, but poverty is no proof of virtue just as wealth is no proof of greed. The Jew prayed every day, "Grant us peace," but pacifism was not an absolute principle and self-defense was permitted on the Sabbath. Reverence for God needn't lead us to disdain human capacity. Man is neither demonic nor angelic by nature but both, and

man's actions are therefore rarely wholly saintly or wholly devilish. There can be fools for Christ but the strangeness of the phrase, fools for Torah, speaks volumes.

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

Spontaneity is much prized, in part because it suggests that life isn't as complex as it really is; but recently I watched a young aide in our Nursery School rush to help a child who had fallen on his back from a jungle gym. She picked him up to soothe him, but her impulsive act might have aggravated his injury. Wisdom has a role to play in human affairs. When the Messiah comes a little child may lead us, but until then the Torah tradition preferred to entrust authority to the experienced and the wise. Simplicity was not considered a virtue. There is an old saying among Jews that "the ignorant man cannot be a saint." When the Judeans rebelled against Roman misrule they were soundly defeated and harshly punished. Hundreds of thousands were killed. Cities were plundered. Judea's population was pauperized. The few who somehow had been spared the worst were moved to give all they had to the homeless and starving. Unexpectedly, the sages suggested they put a limit on their generosity. The limit was high, but it was a limit nonetheless. There was no virtue in giving so much that you added your own family to the hapless caravan.

There may be a certain nobility in turning the other cheek to an attacker; but a child in a fit of rage or a paranoid with his blood running hot must be restrained for his own well-being as well as for the

protection of others. The Torah puts it bluntly: "If a neighbor is attacked you may not stand idly by." Non-resistence is a noble theory, but it doesn't fit all occasions. No ethical theory does.

- I had not thought about it quite this way 'til now, but you've touched one of my problems with Judaism. I want a vision and my rabbi gives me wisdom. I want to dream the impossible dream and he tells me to make sure I'm not embarked on mission impossible. Can't there be an intellectual as well as an emotional overload?

A good case can be made that the Jewish community has tended to overvalue learning and undervalue feeling. Certainly, the Hasidim were convinced that this was so. I can still remember the surprise of many when I announced a course on Jewish mystical techniques: all-night Torah study; fasting from dawn to dusk; midnight vigils and the like. Many were shocked: 'I didn't know Jews ever did such things.' They were surprised to learn that throughout most of the Middle Ages more Kabbaleh was studied than Talmud, that the spiritual center of Jewish life in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was the sacred city of Safed where mystics-in-training clustered around learned spirit masters who taught them esoteric techniques and an esoteric wisdom.

Your rabbi didn't tell you not to go. Abraham provides a useful illustration. Abraham was told: Go! Leave your land, your birthplace and your father's house and go to the land that I will show you. God offers him neither detailed plans nor specific direction. The important thing is to set out; but,even as Abraham is given his head, he is also given a warning: "Be a blessing", be careful that what you do will add to the sum total of happiness, a typically Jewish prescription, the vision splendid with a dash of practical advice.

- That's calculation.

Perhaps. Calculation comes in two models, Aristotle's and Abraham's. In discussing ethics Aristotle proposed a balancing of opposites,

a rather mechanical calculating of consequences. Aristotle's moderation is that of the cool and detached academic. If I followed his mathematics I would constantly be trying to keep my actions moderate and temperate and never take bold steps. Abraham's moderation is preceded by a commitment to holiness. It is a calculus of possibility which seeks not the smooth road to nowhere but the path which will lead to an unfolding of the spirit. The goal is growth, not balance. I often think of Hosea's phrase, "Press on to know God."

- Your way takes too long. Our society needs radical surgery. Prudence and wisdom are rationalizations for inaction and provide excuses for those who aren't willing to do what's required.

Sometimes, but it's equally true that people of firm and certain conviction have caused incalculable anguish and bloodshed. When your convictions stand in the way of what I believe, if my ego is large and my convictions certain, I try to convert you. If I cannot convince you I call you an obscurantist and do what I can even if it requires coercion to change your mind. During the Cultural Revolution millions of Chinese were sent to re-education communes. The Russians handle dissidents in what they euphemistically call mental hospitals.

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

The advice that you receive in a synagogue is likely to be pragmatic as well as principled. If you told me: "I want to drop out of

school and do something for the world," I would suggest that trained minds and hands can do more for the world than wild energies guided only by enthusiasm.

Conversation with your rabbi is likely to raise issues to which you had not as yet given thought. You want to get married. It's an intermarriage. The issue seems cut and dried; you're in love and labels aren't important. You've even decided to raise the children as Jews. Have you thought about what your non-Jewish partner will be giving up? Will their sense of having subordinated their conditioning to yours be a constant irritant in your marriage? What will happen to the children when they're shuttled between believing grandparents? I felt I had done my rabbinic duty when a young man who came to talk with me about his career plans said as he left: 'you're like my law professor who forced us to follow up every possibility in briefing a case.' There are religious traditions where the incomprehensibility of their Scripture, the mystery, is the key to that text's holiness. The Jewish view was that holiness inheres in meaning. Torah reading was never simply a ritual. The rule was that the reading was to be translated into everyday speech and a paraphrase was to be offered for those who could not grasp the text's meaning. Torah study was a universal obligation. Learning is praised, not feared.

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

Your friend's actions suggest that deep need for certainty which we've been talking about. When I interviewed a student who had spent time in an ashram about the attraction of a sixteen-year old pudgy Indian guru who sits cross-legged and teaches a vague set of ideas about love, good vibrations, he told me: "I felt I counted. The guru knew me. He

made me feel we shared a secret. We had truths denied everyone else. He didn't say much, but life quieted down. The group was warm and full of good feelings. He uncomplicated my life." Why did you leave? "I discovered that I was being used. I wanted to visit my parents and was told 'no'. I found I was loved only when I obeyed, and that's not love but manipulation."

Many find the world too complicated for them. Years ago, when you went home, the world remained outside. Now the home no longer provides the child a coherent environment. His parents say one thing, his peers another. His teachers have their own ideas. The world comes in via the television, the telephone and the radio. Forced to cope with an unceasing barrage of experiences, opportunities, and advice, our emotional make-up often reacts like an overloaded electrical circuit and simply shuts off. That's when a guru or cult leader becomes a Godsend. He tells us: 'don't worry about another breakdown, I'll do your thinking for you.'

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

He sounds lucky.

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

- Why doesn't Judaism give me this sense of things coming together?

It can. The holidays and Sabbath can bring structure into a schedule. Exposure to the richness of Torah learning can provide both general ethical guidelines and unexpected insights into the human condition. Franz Rosenzweig defined revelation as the totally unexpected idea that comes into your mind as you read or talk seriously. I've felt

that sense of recognizing unexpected truths and I know that my religious life has allowed me to live with a sense of order.

- I've always felt the lack of someone whom I could focus on and relate to.

- I've always been close to my rabbi. He listens and is helpful.

Anyone who is part of a religious system, and a rabbi certainly is, inevitably has some of its magic or power accrued to him.

The traditional rabbi was a learned man but he was also a holy man whose wisdom was acknowledged to go beyond understanding, knowing, the tradition's specific rules. In Talmudic times, and later among the Hasidim, it was believed his prayers could intercede with God on behalf of Israel or keep the Angel of Death away from a sick bed. Problems were brought to the tzaddik and he gave inspired counsel; indeed, he knew his disciples' problems before they spoke them. His wisdom worked because his circle had faith in it; that is, it worked for the already committed or for those who were willing to suspend disbelief. I am a sophisticated professional in a highly complex and largely secular environment who has no desire to play God, but I have performed miracles, not because I am an adept or even interested in faith healing, but simply because people come to me expecting a miracle and sometimes their faith made a 'miracle' happen. A guru is a human being. He shares in the fallibility which is the hallmark of the human race and, like all of us, he is a product of a particular time, culture and class. He particularly must face the corruptive influences which affect anyone who has power over others. Hasidism failed, not because the rebbes were charlatans, some were, many were not; but because many of them came to enjoy power and because as advisers they reflected their environment and passed on as truth what was, in fact, only the conventional wisdom of their place. Judaism worked hard to keep the Torah rather than a key man out front.

- Why did you assume that my friend was young?

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

- Why?

These are the most convulsive years. There are so many opportunities, so many questions, and so few guidelines. The child has lived among peers and mostly in a school environment. He doesn't know what to expect when he enters the adult world. There are so many decisions to make, so many things he doesn't understand. It's a time of sexual awakening and the exploration of new emotion. Our need for certainty, for a confirming system of values, increases sharply during a dangerous and uncertain passage. Simply put, these are the years when we are most susceptible.

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

We're not immune to confusion.

What about the Habad fellow?/ Our tradition doesn't try to stimulate the conversion experience the way certain churches do; but adolescence is as difficult for us as for any others.

'Being saved' is a specifically Christian term. We talked two days ago about binding experiences and psychologically they're much the same as the sense of being saved or born again. Moments of spiritual awakening, confirming experiences, are not limited to any faith. The prototypical example of such an experience concerns Jacob. Jacob defrauded his brother Esau of his birthright and, understandably fearing Esau's anger, he flees the family camp site. He's alone, unarmed, afraid of pursuit and of attack by robbers or wild animals; but he has no

alternative but to camp in the open. He dreams. In his dream he sees God and hears God say to him: "Do not be afraid. I am with you." When he awakens the Bible has him say: "Surely God is in this place and I knew it not." This sense of awakening, of becoming aware of realities we had not till then perceived is the essence of a binding-conversion experience. It's a moment when our imagination takes over and, to our surprise, we see, or think we see, beneath and behind the reality which normally is present to our senses. In psychological terms the pressures caused by indecision and confusion encourage us to tap spiritual resources which till then have lain dormant. If we do so successfully there is a surge of power which makes us feel what we had not felt before, and since we now have new powers or sensitivities we feel more alive than we had.

- I'd welcome such an experience. It would put my doubts to rest. Why hasn't Judaism created rituals to help us to unlock these feelings?

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

Since not every awakening experience catches the worshipper up in a spiritually significant way, Judaism has been wary of stressing these experiences. Some come down from the mountain uncharged and some are bound to fanatical visions. The voices one hears can lead us into destructive or self-destructive acts. The Grand Inquisitor was a mystic.

Hasidism represents Judaism's most extended encouragement of spiritual awakening and sensitive writers like Martin Buber have helped

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

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

James used what he knew. Protestant Christianity came into being in opposition to papal authority not in an institution but in the individual. Anyone who had sensed the Holy Spirit could preach in its name. Given this way of approaching matters spiritual, it was almost inevitable that conversion, the experience of the Holy Spirit, should become an important element in its theology and church practice. Rituals were devised and churchgoers were conditioned to anticipate the inrush of the Holy Spirit which resolves confusions and doubts and aligns that person with the will of God.

- Is this what is meant to be born again?

Yes.

- Why fight it?

Because of the old problem of mindless commitment. Evangelism has been intimately associated with political attempts like prohibition and Sunday Blue Laws to impose a zealous minority's values on the whole community. The virtue of holding faith to Torah is that it provides a way to rein in the excesses of the committed. There are things that we may

not do. We may not murder property owners who stand in the way of a revolution simply because they are in the way. We may not steal another's good name even if he opposes what we consider progress. We may not slander a political opponent even though we know he is unfit for office.

The Jew is conditioned by a tradition which locates authority in the Torah and in learning. The Torah tradition welcomes the enlivening experience and many of our worship moments, the chant, the music, the song, the swaying, the spirit, are conducive to an awakening but authority does not flow to the 'born again', and there is no reason to artificially stimulate them.

- I've been confused and pressured. Why haven't I had such an experience?

I don't know. Each of us has a different emotional makeup.

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

Those religions and cults which emphasize a transforming religious experience tend to promise that such an awakening will resolve all doubts and end all confusions. Often it doesn't work out that way. Our objective situation doesn't change and we're brought back down to earth.

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

It can. When we experience the mystery which lies within a religious message it becomes sacred to us. The Torah tradition seems cold and objective to an outsider, but warm and comfortable to an intimate. The Torah tradition recognizes that faith can help us handle the obstacles we face as we try to climb as high as we can on the ladder of moral

sensitivity: our appetites, passions, ambitions, greed, envy, but also that faith has limits. I have a deep faith in God but I have not resolved all the contradictions of my nature nor have I any hope ever to do so.

Christianity took one road, justification by faith, the promise of a sacramental salvation, an emphasis on motivation rather than community structure and careful discipline. The Torah tradition took a less dramatic road and worked to create institutions which would encourage ethical growth and create the basis of a humane social order. Christianity emphasizes the awakening experience, Judaism the power of conditioning. Our sages were educators who knew the value of practice and habit: "Do what should be done because it's demanded of you; in time you'll do the right because you'll understand it's the right thing to do." What Judaism does not recognize is a single entity, the hypostasis which Christians called Original Sin, which can be overcome as St. George slew the dragon. Original Sin was defined as thralldom to the devil, being entangled by the libido, being ensleved to lust and ambition, and it was taught that by faith in the Christ's vicerious sacrifice of himself man could break free of these sheckles and save his soul from damnation.

The Torah tradition recognized in our makeups each of the elements of Original Sin, but it denied that these obstacles could be completely removed by an act of faith. We can sublimate our passions but not cut them out.

- Why did I think before today that Judaism lacked a mystical side?

Because until recently all that was "unreasonable" was dismissed as ignorant superstition. The educator looked on the world of the Kabbalah and the dancing and chanting of a Hasidic service in the same way middle-class Americans looked on the Holy Rollers in the Kentucky hills. Our rationalists were as rigid in their orthodoxy as any medieval

theologian. Fortunately, in our day scholars like Gershon Scholem have taught us to appreciate the centrality of Kabbalistic attitudes in the rabbinic ethos and have allowed us to recognize, not only how the imaginative faculty plays a critical role in all experience, but have decoded for us the special feelings which the symbolic language of the mystic encodes.

- I'm confused. First you said plunge in; then you seemed to say stay on the bank.

You're right. You must do both.