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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 familier. 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 perochial. 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 shiveh. 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 communitarian 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 persuasively, that questions of identity cannot be

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

The question, 'why be a Jew', can be treated with theoretical detachment only by those to whom the question is not an immediate one and their theorizing is likely to be more intellectually than personally satisfying. Religious decisions are existential decisions which grow out of private needs, not analytic decisions which grow out of the force of conceptual analysis, so I have tried to deal with the questions they raised out of the context of their lives rather than 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 involved 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 personelly 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 [redacted] 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 out 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 seperate 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 privats 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 enhence 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 bored 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 preparations? Aren't war and guns the interests of the devil rather than of God?

In order to be a peacemaker you must be alive. 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 be 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 proleteriat. 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 discriminatirg 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 krow 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 reflect what can only be called religious values. The law will reflect 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.

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.

- 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 reccgnized 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 humen 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 botly 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

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 emctional 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 thcughts.

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 ccmmunicants 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 calender 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

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shake his head sadly over the long chronicle of people penned into ghettoes, made to wear badges which declared them as pariahs, 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.

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- 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 formulae 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 perochial schools?

How can it not involve itself? Religion's speciel 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 politicel 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 politicel 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 Presidertiel 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 along 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 Kalleh, 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 humen 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 whc 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 hurdred 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 culturel squeamishness about taking a long herd 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 Naziism a cult; but, rather, a distinction based on intensity and size. Cults are small groups of religious people who are a little hotter about their faith than ordinary congregations and who feel that they alone will be redeemed or that they alone possess The Truth.

Cults have emerged in every religious tradition and in every age. Whenever the mainline traditions cool down, or wherever 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 descendants. 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. Issac 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 Neturei Karta. By their deeds shall you know them. If our fanatics have rarely put others to the sword this may in part be explained by the fact that minorities are rarely in a position to do so. Since power corrupts, being of a persecuted minority is good for the soul.

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

trust counted as a virtue. 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 debatable 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 confrcnt, 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, Therapeutae, 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.

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 effects 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, Issac 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 asafsuf, 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 Here 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 effect 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.

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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.

Heins, 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 can'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 firal 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.