



## Daniel Jeremy Silver Collection Digitization Project

Featuring collections from the Western Reserve Historical Society and  
The Jacob Rader Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives

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

Series IV: Writings and Publications, 1952-1992, undated.

Sub-series A: Books, 1961-1990, undated.

---

Reel  
66

Box  
21

Folder  
1357b

Come On In, the Water's Fine, unpublished manuscript, second  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

## Chapter 4

### WHY KEEP AT IT?

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

- All that's medieval and behind us.

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

But the maritens of the world were thinking less to individuals like LaSalles and Reva Luxemburg and more of the symbolic role of the Jew in western liberal consciousness.

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

- Isn't this true?

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

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

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

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

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

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

- You've lost me.

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

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

- That's myth talk.

Much of what we do is governed by myth.

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

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



world by conquest.

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

- That's incredible.

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

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

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

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

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

- That's rhetoric.

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

- Who should I judge Judaism by?

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

You're back to 'outside talk'.

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

## Chapter 5

### THE TREE AND THE RIVER

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

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

Yes.

Q - Then what did my grandfather mean?

~~Our grandfathers were two generations closer to old-world ways.~~

Many had first-hand experience with a Judaism that derived its religious and cultural values from the distant past, consecrated and organized, coherent community, and let them face the future with a confident hope.

The rabbinic understanding of the Torah tradition had provided dignity for centuries, and those raised within it had no difficulty defining themselves or their religion. Your grandfather probably hoped you would be proud of your heritage, practice Judaism in the way he knew, and be active in Jewish activities.

In the old world some Jews were pious, others indifferent; some learned and others simple; some fervent and some skeptical; but most every one took it for granted that there was a definable Jewish way of life.

Day lived it every day and

If you had a question about Jewish practice you could look up the answer

A later

in one of the manuals like Joseph Caro's Shulhan Aruch (17 c). There were differences, to be sure, on minor points and variant customs,



but for most purposes the text was inclusive and definitive. Today traditional observance still engages many, but others who are non-traditional in their observance would unaffectedly describe themselves as "good Jews." America is a pluralistic society and so is the Jewish community. Orthodox and Conservative congregations celebrate most major holidays for two days; Reform observes only one day. Some Jews keep kosher but rarely attend worship. Others attend services regularly but make no attempt to keep the dietary laws. <sup>many have to learn Judaism before they can live it.</sup> There is a Jewish State pioneered by Jews, some of whom would not enter a synagogue of any kind.

4. PRESENT FROM 101

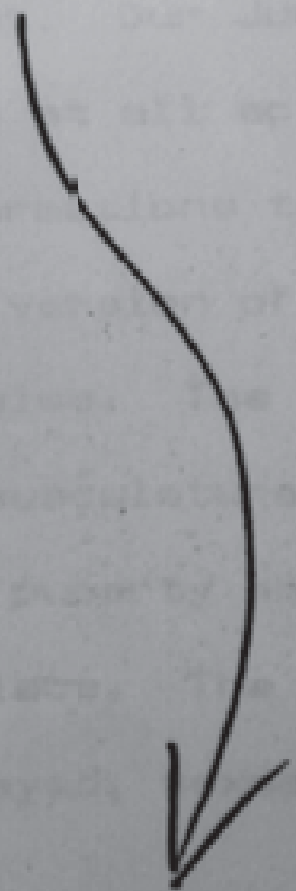
Either we read out all non-orthodox approaches as misguided and heretical or we accept the fact that our community is no longer of a single mind and that there are significant reasons why various groups have reshaped and are reshaping their understanding of the Torah tradition. 112

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

- Define Torah.

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

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



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

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

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



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

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

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

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

WMS  
6N  
602

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

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

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

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

- Why wasn't it?

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

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

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

➤ Rabbinic Judaism conceived of the development of Judaism as an



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

- Why weren't women counted?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

(NATURAL FROM THE)

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

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

If I took Moses to the Ark and opened the scroll which bears his name, he could not read it. The Torah script, though antique, uses an alphabet which was developed several centuries after his death. Nor would he recognize the scroll itself since the Torah did not achieve its present form until after the Babylonian Exile. 1250AT 97-100

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

- What about the truth claim?

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

## Chapter 6

### THINK BOLDLY - BUT THINK

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

first step in developing religious awareness.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



or hear.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

- Why did he say it then?

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

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

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

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



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

- Rituals can't solve our problems.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

- Then it has to become a less formal place.

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

- That's calculation.

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He sounds lucky.

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

- Why did you assume that my friend was young?

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

- Why?

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

- I've a born-again friend who insists that she is a changed and better person since she has accepted Christ. I have enjoyed moments as a Jew, and I know that being Jewish has conditioned many of my attitudes; but I cannot imagine myself saying, 'everything is clear, I feel saved'.

Now that I think of it, I've never heard a rabbi speak of being saved.  
We're not immune to confusion.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

- Is this what is meant to be born again?

Yes.

- Why fight it?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

You're right. You must do both.

