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

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

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Come On In, the Water's Fine, unpublished manuscript, second
draft, chapters 7-15, pages 146-298, undated.

Chapter 7

JUDAISM IS

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

Dad's editor misread the times. Since World War II a tidal wave of religious passion has moved across the globe. Who would have believed college women in Iran would baseach the Ayatollah Khomeini to put them back into purdah? Across the Near East imams have preached jihad, holy war, against Israel. Ireland, Lebanon, Iran, and India give the lie to those who still believe that the world has outgrown religious differences. Nor have religious passions been limited to backward countries or ignorant folk. The Fight-To-Life crusade is fueled by church doctrine and led by many who are well-educated. Nor has the house of Israel been exempt. Some of the settlements on the West Bank serve security purposes. Others are there because groups like the Gush Emunim, the self-styled 'faithful', insist that a Biblical description of the boundaries of the Promised Land must determine the foreign policy objectives of the current government.

The editor was a product of a particular time and situation. It

was an expensive time. The Allies had won the war. America was prosperous and powerful. We seemed to be solving our problems and, among academics at least, there was a tendency to see religion as a set of medieval doctrines floating somewhere out there, interesting but archaic. People like to remind each other that Confucius, Jesus, and Hillel each had taught the Golden Rule and could see no good reason to get excited about quaint customs or parochial formulations. Many assumed that the old theologies would wither away and be replaced by a sensitive up-to-date humanism which would celebrate political freedom and exalt the potentialities of each person.

Cultural anthropologists had located religion in every known culture, in the process making it clear that all claims to a monopoly on truth or to sole possession of the keys of the Kingdom were without merit. Socialist theory identified religion with other-worldliness and the encouragement of political passivity and, as such, with the propaganda spread by those who benefited from the injustices of the status quo. To use a favorite word of the day, religion was no longer relevant.

Dad's editor considered himself a reasonable man and in his mind it stood to reason that modern thought had voided all assertions of theological distinction. The ministers and rabbis he knew acted, in their everyday work, like social workers and counselors rather than celebrants of a mystery. I think it was Jean Paul Sartre who said, "the best way to feel oneself no longer a Jew is to reason." He might equally well have said 'Christian' or 'Muslim'. There is a Christian message and a Jewish message. Each hints at truth, but, as I keep insisting, God alone knows the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth.

My father's editor, whom I later got to know, was, in fact, a communicant of an American civic religion which assumes the unquestioned value of democracy, social reform, and individual freedom, and bases

its vision in the faith - I use the word deliberately - that what is contradictory, erratic, or malicious in human action results from societally induced distortions of our innate decency rather than any inherent limitation of human nature. He shared with many other fine and gentle people the disadvantage of being an educated, mildly liberal, middle-class white American male who, secure in his country's power and prosperity, felt confident that his values were right and that ultimately they would be accepted by the rest of the world. There were still witch doctors and faith healers but they belonged to the Third World and the other America and would disappear as the benefits of learning and prosperity spread.

- Do you disagree with his proposition that humanism, selfish or erratic behavior is the result of the human spirit having been brutalized by the cruelties and dehumanizing institutions of the social order and that, as our institutions are reformed, a gentler and nicer breed of people will emerge?

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

- I read an article recently that said that Sodom and Gemorrah

had been located by archeologists. Why do you call them myths?

Researchers have been excavating sites on the southeast bank of the Dead Sea where the cities of the Plain are presumed to have been situated. They have tentatively labeled these tells as the Cities of the Plain, but as yet no inscription has been found identifying any site. But, even if we could positively locate these cities, the Genesis story would still be a myth, a story whose truth lies below the surface. The Torah is not interested in reporting historical fact, but in introducing the God-Abraham dialogue into a famous bit of history about the sudden destruction of certain towns. The dialogue, which is the heart of the myth, tells us what the religious leaders of Israel wanted to make known about God, that He is just and not vengeful, reasonable, not a tyrant.

- Go back to your editor and his ideas about religions. Was he wrong?

The world-wide resurgence of religion certainly suggests so.

- Where did he make his mistake?

He looked at religion as a cluster of ideas, most of which he felt were passe. He failed to understand that religion fulfills a universal need, to give meaning and purpose to life, and that religions are not judged in terms of logical consistency and up-to-dateness but in terms of their emotional effectiveness. He also forgot that social upheaval, not only intensifies religious need, but turns people towards their own. In times of anxiety, we want our families near us and we pull our religion close.

Where Judaism Differed was published in 1956 just before ethnic and black studies burst on the scene. Blacks, it seemed, wanted to be black, not white. Spanish parents wanted their children taught in their native tongue. Christians wanted to be evangelical, not simply ethical. Disturbed by the blind impersonality of the mass society - T. S. Eliot's

line caught its spirit: "here are decent godless people, their only memory the asphalt road and a thousand lost golf balls" - many subsequently turned away from the cosmopolitan ideal, 'no artificial divisions', which had characterized earlier progressive thought, and recognized the importance of the special and surprising messages. Everywhere there was a renewed interest in 'soul'. Some turned to the cults, but far more to the religious gospels which had provided their ancestors with identity, moral certainty, and collective pride. It was the age of born-again evangelism and Jesus Christ Superstar. It was a time for "Tradition, Tradition". Religion was in.

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

Diversity stimulates both distance and tension, but there's no way out. We resist being boiled down into a bland stew. My editor went to school when sociologists were describing American society as a melting pot; but cultural pluralism won the day.

George Santayana is credited with the observation that to try to be religious without espousing a specific religion is like trying to speak without controlling a specific language. Religion never exists in the abstract. Catholicism, Shamanism, Shintoism, and the Torah tradition are distinct religions and natural expressions of particular religious civilizations. Religion is a surprising and special message and those who feel addressed by it. Religions share common social and psychological functions, but identity of function is simply that and no more. America's civil religion and Soviet Communism are diametrically opposed in teaching and messianic hope, and it's inevitable that they compete for people's loyalty.

- If I accept your all-inclusive definition of religion, I can

appreciate what you're saying. But limit yourself to the conventional religions. Aren't Judaism and Christianity built around similar values? Isn't the Bible shared? Don't we speak of a Judeo-Christian tradition?

There are similarities but far more differences. What is Torah to Judaism is Old Testament to Christianity. When you enter a church you will find an English Bible resting on a lectern. Inside you will find the Old Testament and the New. If you attend services you will hear two readings, one from each section. That chosen from the Old Testament will, in all likelihood, be from the Psalms or the Prophets. As you know, the ark in a synagogue contains only the Torah, the Five Books of Moses, that part of Scripture from which the fewest of the scheduled church readings are selected. The church believes that the Old Testament contains important, even inspired, materials, a chronicle of the first stage of sacred history, and prophecies about the Christ-Messiah; and they believe that much of it has been cancelled or superseded, particularly the Torah law, the part Jews declare to be the heart of God's special and surprising message.

- We share the Ten Commandments.

The concept more than its specifics. Jews read, "you shall not murder". Christians translate, "you shall not kill"; their version fits more closely Jesus' 'turn the other cheek' sermon than the Torah's clear intent since the law permits wars of self-defense and stipulates capital punishment for certain crimes. Behind this technical difference in translation lies a critical difference in religious attitudes. Paul, and subsequently all of Christianity, denied the authority of Torah law over their lives. The Ten Commandments were an exception and were treated as a self-contained unit. Rabbinic Judaism accepted all the commandments as sacred and necessarily related all the commandments to each other.

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

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

- We share the hope of peace on earth.

But we express it differently. The Christian vision is of a world joined in faith in the mystic body of Christ. The Jewish vision emphasizes Zion, the land, established in justice, and the world rejoicing in justice and peace without necessarily being joined in one religious communion.

- Aren't such differences really limited to official pronouncements? People don't care.

Differences in a religion's shape inevitably have an effect on individual attitudes. Try a simple test. Ask a few friends whether or not they agree with the sentence: Faith is a private matter. I think you will find that most Christians will say 'yes' unequivocally; and most Jews will agree, but quickly add something about the importance of community. There is a much stronger sense of community in Jewish conditioning than in the Christian ethos; a sense of interdependence which has been fostered throughout Jewish history and leads Jews everywhere to support Israel, welcome Soviet emigres, and worry about their co-religionists in South Africa and the Argentine. Jewish communities in every town of size in the United States organize fund-raising drives for caring institutions, religious education, and the relief of Jews everywhere under the rubric, 'we are one'. Such support is instinctive among Jews who have been taught by the prophets as well as by harsh experience that being a Jew involves you with God and with the Jewish people. We expect rabbis to be active in the community and not lead a life of secluded devotions. Moses went back to Egypt to bring out a whole people. The rabbis called the Jewish people an extended family: "all Israel are related."

- Yet, people of many religions cooperate in city affairs.

On some issues. The Roman Catholic bishop of Cleveland and I have worked closely on race-related matters, particularly desegregation of the public schools, but we are on opposite sides of the political fence when it comes to Federal aid to parochial schools and the proposed anti-abortion constitutional amendment. I support the Planned Parenthood Association, and I am sure he does not. Inevitably, the specialness of each religion's message will lead to different agendas and to different attitudes towards specific social problems. Elements of the Protestant Church translate "remember the Sabbath day" as a command to enact Sunday Blue Laws and argue that the public school day should begin with prayer, positions which the Jewish community opposes. Concern for churches and communicants in the Arab world has led international church bodies, both Catholic and Protestant, to be less than generous in their pronouncements on Israel and more than generous in their understanding of terrorism.

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

The Jewish tradition emerged in a Near Eastern cultural environment where the body and the soul were accepted as inseparably intertwined. The

Biblical word, nefesh, denotes both soul and the physical heart. Christianity emerged a millenium later into a world deeply influenced by Greek categories of thought whose tendency was to separate matter and form, body from soul. Form, the soul, was seen as eternal, pure; matter, the flesh, as perishable and impure. Formed by men who thought naturally in this dualistic way, early Christianity set high value on a religious discipline which would free the soul from its prison within the body. To that end it encouraged ascetic disciplines such as fasting and the mortification of the flesh. Marriage could only be seen as a concession to the flesh.

- Aren't there differences among Jews about love and marriage?

In the long record which is Jewish history you can locate men who bathed in cold rivers and who fasted to break free from the power of their appetites. Nachmanides rejoiced in marriage. Maimonides married because it was a Torah command, 'be fruitful and multiply', only to have children. But the Torah's unitary understanding of the human being continued to act as a caution not to divide man into parts and declare some parts seemly and others unseemly. The community appreciated the piety of those of ascetic temperament but did not declare their way superior to those who worshipped God with a whole heart and after a good meal.

- It's all interesting, but wasn't your editor saying: what was, was; but is no more. I know that you're often out crusading with a number of local ministers and priests.

On the issues we agree on, but for all our agreements we draw from and go back to a particular polity, tradition and community, and the force of our roots and religion should not be underestimated. All of us, of course, feel the pressure of, and respond to the value of, the civil religion and the American culture. Priests, ministers and rabbis are sentient beings not programmed robots.

- Given the existence of such ambivalence, wasn't the editor right in believing that the old differences are disappearing?

I don't think so. The Liberal religious groupings are a minority within their communities and it's the fundamentalist and traditional groups that are showing the most growth. If anything, the old differences are being reasserted. Pope John Paul is staunching liberal attitudes towards birth control and divorce in his church. Fundamentalist churches in America are working hard to reinstitute Blue Laws and prayers in public school and the rabbinate in Israel has moved to reject as Jews those converted by non-orthodox rabbis. We live in an age when ideology is in full cry and where submission to church authority is being demanded.

- You speak of a Torah tradition. In effect, there are Torah traditions. My rabbi just had a knock down drag out debate with an orthodox scholar about women rabbis.

A river sometimes separates and runs on two sides of an island, but the flow ultimately comes again together. We differ on a shopping list of issues, but the sense of a shared part and destiny keeps these differences from being completely decisive. Anti-semitism doesn't ask a Jew's denomination. Secularist Jews eat kosher food at community meetings. Non-orthodox in Israel certainly resent having to conform to rabbinic laws of personal status; but all Israeli Jews speak the same language, study the same history and follow the same calendar. Arguments are in the family.

- I understand family arguments (laughter).

- When I was in Israel there were pickets in front of a Jerusalem hospital which was performing autopsies. Liberal friends there told me that the orthodox won't permit Reform and Conservative rabbis to officiate at weddings, that they impose restrictions on everything from abortion to divorce. How can you talk of a Torah consensus?

Threatened by a fast-changing world they didn't make and don't

comprehend, some orthodox Jews have retreated into a defensive shell constructed of the forms of the past. Unfortunately, their shell has hardened over time to the point where little of the enlivening spirit of the Torah manages to express itself. The more the world changes the tighter they become. Don't judge Judaism by its relics.

- In my experience, there's no more bitter argument than a family feud. What makes you think we'll stay together?

If separation occurs it will be tragic. It could happen. Family life requires compromise and patience and we have our 'there is no other way but mine' fringe. But in Cleveland all the congregations meet to talk of shared concerns, and on the national level there's a Synagogue Council of America. Most try.

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

Some groups emphasize the letter of the law, others its spirit; and both groups can make a case for their position. Take the issue of homosexuality. The rabbinic tradition emphasizes a specific Torah rule which condemns homosexual acts; the liberal tradition cites Torah texts which prohibit treating anyone as a misfit or outcast. Our personal judgment will depend on whether we give greater weight to a formal rule or a broad injunction, our general attitude towards change, and whether our conceptual model is the river or the tree. Nor is it a simple matter of either/or. I'm troubled by the idea of a gay synagogue. I believe in a religious community which is a reflex of the whole community. I'm afraid a single focused synagogue would come to identify righteousness with a set of narrow needs. I do admit that a great divide cuts across modern Jewish life. Rabbinic halacha permits abortion only when there is

a direct threat to the mother's life. Liberal Judaism does not oppose abortion when the woman feels emotionally or physically threatened. Both traditions affirm the sanctity of life. There are differences, and they are basic; but, as long as we think seriously about Torah values, our conclusions are within the tradition, and in many ways our pluralistic community gains from our disagreements. Debate sharpens awareness and the existence of various communities creates options. The more flexible among us force the formalists to consider whether circumstances have changed so much that people are being hurt rather than helped by the regimens which an older commentary suggested, and the formalists force those of liberal spirit to examine their positions more carefully to make sure that those positions are the result of serious reflection on the Torah tradition and not simply an arbitrary selection of a text or two whose only purpose is to make the tradition more convenient. I have noticed this benefit particularly during the abortion debate. Liberals no longer dismiss out of hand criticisms of abortion as a birth control technique and formalists have begun to seek ways to adjust their reservations to the diagnostic capacities of modern medicine.

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

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

malformed or unwanted baby.

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

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

- A young woman who had sat quietly allowed that she found my discussion interesting but what had this to do with her and her friends? History is over. Paul, Augustine, and Nachmanides are long dead. My friends, Christian and Jewish, and I live in a liberated society, take our advice on sex and marriage from professional counselors, and neither know nor care what our respective traditions teach. Indeed, my rabbi tends to equivocate, but when all is said and done he believes the new morality is generally healthy and I doubt he could base his view on the Torah.

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

- Then isn't all talk about Jewish identity pointless? Samuel may get his presents on Hanukkah and Christopher on Christmas, but both asked

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

I can't be truly human if I lack a compelling vision of life's coherence, a religion, and the Torah tradition is such a vision and one with a remarkably good track record. Where it had once been chic to disparage the dietary laws as outdated public health measures and mock the tallit and tefillim as peculiar prayer uniforms, in recent years social scientists have studied the psychological and societal function of ritual and reported on the importance of ritual for mental health. Ritual is in. Bar and Bat Mitzvahs, Selihot services, Afruf have reappeared in old-line liberal congregations where once decorum and a sermon comprised the liturgy. Guita evangelism is not unknown in traditional synagogues. The pendulum has swung so far some of us are concerned that the religious life may become a form of idolatry for some who will neglect the parallel emphasis on learning and social justice. Fortunately, one of the grand things about this ancient and rich tradition is that it survives cultural fads because it is so many sided and contains wisdom relevant to all sides of life's contradictions. Ultimately, the forgotten themes are picked up.

We're humans all, and all of us have taken some of our values from the civil religion, but never underestimate the power of conditioning, environment and tradition. Even where the fires of belief burn low, the spirit glows with a special cast. The philosopher Bertram Russell, making it clear in his Autobiography that he lost all belief in Christian doctrine, coming across this paragraph by him about a visit to

Greece:

I found myself in a little church belonging to the days when Greece was part of the Byzantine Empire. To my astonishment, I felt more at home in this little church than I did in the Parthenon or in any of the other Greek buildings of Pagan times. I realized then that the Christian outlook had a firmer hold upon me than I had imagined. The hold was not upon my beliefs, but upon my feelings. It seemed to me that where the Greeks differed from the modern world it was chiefly through the absence of a sense of sin, and I realized with some astonishment that I, myself, am powerfully affected by this sense in my feelings though not in my beliefs.

Would a young Christian respond to the idea of spending time on a kibbutz? Would a young Jew think of spending two years in church service as the Mormons do?

- No, but both might join Vista or the Peace Corps. I can see the impact of the larger community but not the impact of the Torah tradition.

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

- My generation seems to be going two ways at once. We are taking on many of our grandparents' religious ways and discarding many of their social forms. 'Give me that old time religion and the new morality.' I sometimes feel that we're like a young child who carries his

security blanket whenever he leaves his room.

The term, new morality, can be simply a cover for the old immoralities. Careless sex is simply careless and what is euphemistically called an open marriage is not a marriage. My question always is whether these changes are attempts to adjust standards of loyalty, responsibility, and honest feeling to a new situation or arrangements of convenience. Clearly, we must find new ways to support family ties, bind close the ties of love, see to it that each child is a wanted child, and bring dignity to old age. The older family had an authoritarian base. In a world where women have finally emerged as persons, partnership marriages and concepts of shared parenting are appropriate. With the disappearance of the extended family and the fact that both husband and wife may need or want to work, it may not be possible to care for aged parents in the home. The older forms are not the only ways to be "holy". Kiddushim implies an unshakable concern for the sanctity of human relationships, not a requirement that our homes and marriages duplicate those of our parents. The new morality is not the first new morality in Jewish life. Polygamy was the accepted way in Biblical times and remained the custom / in Sephardic communities until quite recently in the Muslim environment, and their religious leaders had no trouble seeing Kiddushim, sanctity, in such marriages. It's not the form but the spirit which consecrates.

- But Judaism's stance on moral issues seems vague and undefined.

Really not. There is a broad consensus in such areas as the sanctity of family, respect of persons, race relations, the well-cultivated mind, compassion, sensitivity and empathy, peace, man's careful stewardship of God's gift of life and the good earth.

The Torah contains the fixed and the dynamic, both specific commandment and general principle, and a surprising amount of different opinions. The book of Leviticus mandates a rich and complex sacrificial

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

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

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

- Accepting what you say, what holds such a disparate community together?

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

Chapter 8

BUT I DON'T BELIEVE IN GOD

- My problem is that the synagogue is a place for believers and I'm not sure I believe in God. The Sabbath was approaching. Services were scheduled. It was the first time a personal God had come up.

No one signs articles of faith when they join a congregation. Synagogue rolls and services are open to all who care about the Torah tradition and the Jewish people. Before we begin the Kol Nidre service on Yom Kippur there is a ritual which goes back to the bad days when many Jews were forced to accept baptism as the only alternative to death. Some became martyrs. Others chose to dissimilate. As you can imagine, those who became Christians were not whole-hearted and, on this holiest of days, many yearned to worship in the familiar way; so a formula was introduced which said simply: permission exists even for apostates to join in this service.

Caught up as we all are in an age of uncertainty, synagogue membership reflects our heterogeneity and respects our doubts, but tries to take us beyond them. After all, life is not a chance chemical explosion or a hapless, hopeless passage from cradle to crypt; purpose and promise are implicit in creation. God is the Guarantor that it all has meaning and the Redeemer who validates our hopes. The existence, the oneness and the personal concern of God for each person are central elements in the Torah tradition's special and surprising message.

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

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

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

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

- Why would a non-believer come?

Some who are agnostic are nevertheless deeply involved with aspects of Jewish culture or are deeply committed to the survival of the Jewish people.

- But I feel a hypocrite when I am in a synagogue.

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

- How can any modern believe in a personal God?

I do.

- But you're a rabbi.

I wasn't always.

- How did it happen?

Slowly and quietly. In school everything I studied suggested a creative unity within and behind the universe. History was my field and every place I touched the human experience I sensed the divine capacity of the human soul. Faith, I've decided, is much like love. Some

relationships are tempestuous and take unexpected turns. Some wrestle the long night with their doubts, remember the image of Jacob wrestling with the angel; others simply, often unconsciously, let God in and that's that.

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

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

Fourteen-year olds remind me of butterflies beginning to shake off the restricting cocoon. They have outgrown the protective but circumscribed world in which they were nurtured, they are emerging into a new world; but it is an unfamiliar world and their movements often seem

awkward, even contorted. It's not easy to leave behind with old toys and a favorite teddy bear the God of the nursery, part guardian angel, part doting grandfather. Most have at least begun the process. It's an age of doubt and challenge. One had told a lie and had not been caught. One had prayed to God during her grandmother's illness but the grandmother died. An athlete was able to tell me the exact hour and day on which he began to doubt. I still remember that date and time, seven p.m., November 12, 1977. He was in Junior High School at the time. He had an afternoon paper route. He was also captain of an intramural basketball team. Late one school day, an important game was unexpectedly rescheduled. The weather was bad and the boy was unable to bribe or cajole any friend to carry the route for him. In his distress, he entered a phone booth, closed the door and offered God a heartfelt prayer. "I must play this game; let none of my customers complain to the circulation manager. Please, God, just this once let me get away with not delivering my papers." At seven p.m. the telephone rang. It was the Circulation Manager. Customers had complained that they had not received their evening paper. During pre-adolescence we trust; we test; and, if God fails the test, we reject.

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

"This grim world really scares me. Every once in a while I realize the cruelty and insensibility of it and that's when I begin to wonder. We can't just be here to disagree, fight, and eventually blow ourselves to bits. There must be some purpose or reason behind us. That is when I think of God. This ideal is, in a measure, a crutch to lean on. It gives me some hope for the future. I believe I have outgrown the 'old man in the sky watching over me'-type of feeling though I can't really

describe what has replaced it. Sometimes I can't really accept God, sacrilegious as it may seem, but I might as well be honest about it - probably because the abstract concept is over my head. When I look around and see the hatred and ugliness, I don't understand how God could allow it. The closest I can come, from my experience, is conscience as that part of us which is created in God's image."

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

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

have looked for an easy out to the whole question of life and death and origin and end and have simply attached the tag of 'God' to it all. Something much more complex, in my opinion, is the answer."

- Did you confirm these three?

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

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

- You've had doubts then?

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

Over the holidays a collegian came to visit. He had had a recent spiritual awakening and God meant a great deal to him. He wanted to know more about the rabbinate as a profession. I happened to have these papers on my desk and I asked him to read several. He read with attention and with increasing puzzlement: "How can you confirm these young people? Read this."

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

What's the problem?

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

I asked my true believer to define a religious person.

A religious person is one who believes in God.

Have you never had doubts and questions?

Certainly, but I now have faith.

Were you certain as an adolescent, always certain?

No.

Were you confirmed?

Yes.

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

At various times in our history groups and individuals have drawn up what they considered to be the principles of the Jewish faith. Moses Maimonides' Thirteen Articles represent the best known of these efforts. Other groups and individuals have denied that Judaism demands doctrinal affirmation. Moses Mendelssohn's statement that Judaism has no dogmas is the best known of these formulations of Judaism as a tradition based on deed rather than creed. The truth, as always, rests on middle ground.

There are affirmations and these affirmations have been subject to constant reinterpretation as time and environment change. When I first read Maimonides' articles as abstract principles, I found myself saying: I disagree in whole or part with five of the thirteen; that the Torah was given by God to Moses, that the Torah is immutable, that God rewards and punishes, that a Messiah will come and that there is resurrection of the dead. When I read Maimonides' extended explanation of these articles I began to see them in context, to sense the variety of interpretations to which they have been subjected, and to recognize the special twist Maimonides gave to an idea like reward and punishment, and I no longer feel myself a nein-sager. The problem with any dogma is that it abstracts and diminishes an idea and pulls it out of the living, developing tradition in which, as you know, I set great store. In matters of faith, the first step is to feel you belong within the community and only then do we ask you to open your hearts to the possibilities implicit in our teachings.

- I remember a cartoon of a group of monks in the Southwest looking out along the mesa towards a beautiful sunset and calling out: "Author, author." I have no trouble with God as Creator. I can't believe that the wonder that is nature is the result of a chemical accident. I once memorized a sentence of Einstein's: "The scientist's religious feeling is the form of a rapturous amazement at the harmony of natural law, which reveals an intelligence of such superiority that, compared with it, the systematic thinking and acting of human beings is an utterly insignificant reflection." But I have never understood why the Torah tradition makes such a to-do about God's Oneness.

An early eighteenth century New England Catechism written by a good New England divine who wanted the world to know that had he been God he would have nominated a more appropriate nation as his standard

bearer, includes the couplet: "How odd that God the Jews should choose." This Puritan might have been surprised to learn that the rabbis had puzzled the same oddity. How was it that among all the mighty empires of the world little Israel was chosen? One suggestion was that God did not wish His law of truth and peace to be imposed by conquest or by coercion, so He chose the least and the smallest.

Twice each day Biblical men stopped their work and spoke the simple watchword of our people, "God is, and God is One." Today the Shema is recited during every service, it is the climactic and concluding affirmation of Yom Kippur and the final affirmation spoken by the Jew before he dies. Monotheism, the belief in the one God, or at least belief in the unity of all that is, now seems almost an inevitable idea, since it is shared by the major faiths of Western civilization and seems to be confirmed by our science which insists that there are overarching, natural laws which bind all that is together.

Monotheism may seem natural to us. It was not to our ancestors. From time to time I have twisted the old doggerel into a different theme: How odd the Jews one God should choose. The world they knew was made up of distinct and separate parts. The moon moved across the night sky and was replaced in the morning by the sun which moved in a different orbit. The wind rose and blew and no man knew from where it came. Streams bubbled up from seemingly bottomless sources. Each element in nature was distinctive and appeared self-actuating. Polytheism seemed logical to the ancient Middle East since the activity of nature could be explained only by assuming an indwelling spirit or god in each element.

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

The ancients did not actually worship sticks or statues. They saw their idols as representations of the complex and not totally coherent

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

Ancient men worshipped at various shrines. Since the gods were related to visible objects it was only natural to believe that the god actually lived there. At the shrine particular rites were performed by appointed priests for the purpose of placating the god's anger or gaining favor. The Hebrews, too, had their shrines. It would be centuries before they would outgrow the edifice complex, if they ever really did; but beginning in the eighth century B.C.E. prophets emerged who taught the people that "the whole earth is full of His glory" and that shrine activity should not be the major focus of the religious life. The focus of the religious life was to become a holy community; and holiness, be it remembered, always was defined in active ethical terms. Those who were able to conceive of God's oneness understood that religion involves acts of holy living which are not shrine-centered.

The pagan had no concept of humanity. Their myths declared the home folk to be descendants of a union between a patron God and a progenitor and other folk to be lesser breeds. Peoples spoke different languages

and exhibited different body types, and, since there was no myth of a common ancestor, by all evidence nations were as different from each other as the various of an animal species. The concept of humanity could emerge only among a people long accustomed to monotheism. If God is one and His reach is world-wide, all peoples are His creatures and a myth such as that of Adam and Eve can be conceived which binds all God's human creatures into a single family.

Idolatry separated man from man, city from city, nation from nation. If Ra, the great god of Egypt, created man, the Egyptian was created first and belonged to a master race. All other peoples were the creation, so the myths had it, of the concubines of the gods, consequently a lesser breed. Idolatry consecrated the separation of men into city-states, nations and races, and failed to provide them a unifying vision which would raise humanity's needs above each group's special needs. Racism grows rapidly in the soil of idolatry. So do the rationalizations which justify slavery and caste. When the emperor of Assyria made known Marduk's law, he proclaimed a rule which protected the persons and privileges of the nobility far more than those of the peasant and lower castes. The slave had no protection at all. If a slave was murdered by a free man no charge of murder was leveled and the matter was concluded. His owner was paid the dead man's market value as restitution. Idolatry precludes the notion of a single humanity. The oneness of God requires it; one creator, one world; one humanity; one moral law for all.

Idolatry dethrones God and enthrones some human passion or interest in His place. Some worship themselves. Some worship a guru. The Communists' idol is the ideology they call "scientific Marxism", and those who argue for the untrammelled freedom of the marketplace have an idol called capitalism. All ideologies which claim infallibility are idolatries.

The ancient saw himself as a pawn and plaything of the gods, powerless against fate. Conceiving God as one permitted men to consider the possibility there was a single power beyond and that could, in fact, gain some control over their lives, since this single God rewards the good and punishes the evil. The Hebrew felt that you get what you deserve. A major goal of life became the building of a record which deserved reward. The Torah tradition emphasizes the theme of moral accountability in every way possible. The liturgy of both Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur is shaped on the myth of an annual assize during which the individual's deeds are reviewed by the Supreme Judge. The myth is refracted throughout these services, never more pointedly or poignantly than in a medieval prayer known as the Unetaneh Tokef: "Let us declare the utter holiness of this day for it is one of awe and dread. . .truly You are judge, accuser and all-knowing witness, You write and seal, record and number, remember all things that have been forgotten, open the book of remembrances wherein each deed speaks of itself. Overhead a great shofar is sounded, the angels join in fear and cry out: 'Behold the day of judgment'." The idea that each of us is being constantly judged is a dominant and recurrent theme in the Torah tradition. But God is merciful as well as strict. He will weigh our intentions as well as our deeds, and there is always a second chance. "Repentance, prayer, and righteousness can avert the severe decree."

Israel's affirmation of God's oneness brought about a revolution in human thought by introducing a welcome measure of balance to ethical discussion. In the pagan myths each of the gods was endowed with specific virtues or qualities. There was a god of love, another of war, another of wisdom. There was a god of life and there was a god of the Kingdom of the Dead. Each god encouraged his communicants to shape their lives around his attribute; but, as Aristotle observed in his Ethics, any virtue taken to excess becomes a vice. The Egyptians so centered their worship

on death and immortality that they literally buried in the uncaring sand wealth that might have lifted the burden of abjectness from the mass of their people and guaranteed the nation a prosperous future.

If you worshipped the great Fire god, Maloch, your worship consisted of having a son or daughter walk across burning coals and throw themselves on the fires of the altar. If you belonged to one of the fertility cults of Canaan you worshipped at a shrine where the earth's fertility was stimulated by orgiastic rite at which worshippers impregnated the shrine's female attendants, a form of sympathetic magic designed to fertilize the earth. In the Torah tradition children are carefully nurtured, not sacrificed, and the earth's fertility has little to do with shrine activity. "If you are willing and obedient, you shall eat the good of the land; but if you refuse and rebel you shall be devoured by the sword."

- Surely there ^{were} non-orgiastic cults and kindly idolators?

Yes, and when Jews had separated themselves from the impress of the all-pervading pagan cultures, when that battle had been won, we begin to find some of the sages of the Talmud agreeing that there are men of quality among the pagans. But Judaism never let down its guard against the dangers of misplaced worship.

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

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

You've elided the text. The Shema reads: Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is one." Two themes: God is the creator, the ground of all being; and Israel has a special relationship to God and God to Israel.

- You're talking about the covenant.

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

When the Torah is taken out from the ark the service calls for a recitation of God's attributes as those are phrased in the Torah: "The Lord, the Lord God is merciful and gracious, long-suffering and abundant in goodness and ever true, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity, transgression and sin." The Jewish God was more than mysterious power. He was holy, the model of moral perfection. The consummate duty of the Jew was to pattern himself after God as he had revealed Himself in Torah. God had clothed the nakedness of Adam and Eve; visited Abraham while he was recovering from surgery; comforted Isaac after the death of his father; reminded Moses of his duty; so, "After the Lord your God shall you walk."

- You're getting ahead of me. How did it happen that our fathers made the conceptual leap from idolatry to monotheism?

Some have tried to explain "the Lord is one" as an insight born of living on the edge of empty wilderness. The Hebrews were sheep-herding tribes who lived in the open land between the Canaanite cities and the desert and so nothing stood between them and the sun, the storm, and the sweep of the earth; presumably, daily experience with the on-rolling cycles of nature sensitized them to the One behind all discrete phenomena. This argument is highly dramatic, but does not explain why, of all the bedouin tribes, only the Hebrews outgrew a polydemonistic and polytheistic culture and came to an understanding of a single creative principle.

Others reverse the argument and explain monotheism as an insight born of living on the edge of civilization. As desert folk the Israelites

watched with detached amusement as city-state conquered another to see it turned around by a thrd and how each victory solemnly reduced the defeated gods to a subordinate place in their pantheon only to have their God in his turn similarly treated. According to this theory, the haplessness of the gods to arrest their endless cycle led our fathers to seek unity behind the endless parade. This explanation again fails to explain why only the Israelites saw the foolishness of all this.

A few historians argue that monotheism was borrowed from the Egyptians. The Exodus story seems to place the Israelites in Egypt in the fourteenth century during a time of great stress when a strong-minded Pharaoh Akhenaton set out to destroy the power of the priestly elite by overthrowing all the ancient gods but one, the solar disk, Aton, whom he raised as god above all the other deities of Egypt. This theory holds that Akhenaton's Hebrew slaves knew of these events and Moses, basing himself on Akhenaton's lead, proceeded to dedicate his people to a single God, all-powerful, all-embracing, a One. There are many problems with this theory; while we are fairly certain of Akhenaton's political motives, no one is certain if Akhenaton's concerns were also theological; we are not sure of Moses' dates; and any argument based on cultural borrowing is at best tentative.

- How did monotheism emerge?

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

- You don't actually believe that Moses went up Mount Sinai and that God spoke to him there?

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

- Do you mean that God described Himself to Moses?

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

Monotheism raised God above nature. "In the beginning God created." Man was not subservient to the unpredictable forces of nature but covenanted to the Creator God Who, according to Genesis, had given man power to subdue the animal kingdom and to use nature to his benefit. This shift in perspective increased man's self-assurance and sense of worth. It also set the stage for science. Pagan gods cannot be investigated; their actions were autonomous and therefore unpredictable; but, if nature is distinct from God, is not God but is object, then our minds can investigate its furthest reaches.

The pagan world worshipped its gods and feared them. Their gods, like humans were caught up in private plans and conflicts - the Trojan war began in an argument over the winner of a Heavenly beauty contest -

and the activities and whims of the gods often turned out to be harmful to men and nations. You never knew what a god would do, so your relationship to God was more that of courtier to tyrant than son to loving father. "And you shall love the Lord your God" was a new thought which germinated among those who no longer equated nature's unpredictability with the activities of the various gods born of a new state of mind which had begun to conceive and shape worship as thanks-speaking rather than as a form of gift giving. Sacrifices remained central to worship as long as The Temple stood; but in their habitations Jews became accustomed to the idea that the sacrifice God truly desires is "a humble and contrite heart."

If all have one father, God values equally the various labors we each do. The Torah tradition was a scholarly tradition, yet no attempt was made to disguise the fact that some of the sages earned their living as shoemakers, smiths, and craftsmen. The theory was that "the study of the Torah is excellent if it is combined with a worldly occupation for this combined effort puts sin out of mind", but it was equally true that labor without learning reduced man to the level of a pack animal. Compare the snobbery which characterized certain tasks as noble and others as demeaning. The middle-class in America still has trouble with a child who wants to become a factory worker. The landed gentry held merchants in disrepute. In ancient times nobles entered a shrine by one door, commoners by another.

- Hold up. If God is One where do all the angels and spirits of some of the hymns and the folk tales come from? I've been reading I. B. Singer and his stories are full of such imaginings. Is Judaism really a monotheist tradition?

In terms of theology, yes. In terms of popular faith, no. The faith has proclaimed consistently that God has dominion over all that

is seen and unseen. Satan in the Job story is not an independent power but an angel in God's court who has no independent power and must ask God's permission to test Job. But over the centuries many feared Satan and holy men cast spells against the evil spirits. The theory was that all the angels and spirits, what was called the "Family of Heaven", did God's will, but official theology was often compromised by credulity.

- Credulity is just a polite word for superstition.

Jews were often superstitious. Were, Are. Before you feel too superior remember that ours is the Age of Aquarius. The oneness of God is a concept which is hard for the mind to grasp. How do you envision what cannot be seen, touched, or described? Life is full of premonitions which we do not fully understand and unexpected experiences; moreover, before medicine discovered germs and viruses, how else was disease to be explained?

- But I'm not superstitious.

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

- It's my identification as a Jew.

But don't you feel a bit unprotected without it?

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

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

The Torah tradition equated God and good. Since idolatry supported indecency, injustice, the separation of races, its worship must be swept away and replaced by Torah worship. When Moses asks to see God he is told, "You cannot see My face, but I will make My glory pass behind you." In what did God's glory consist? I am the Lord, a God of mercy and a God of righteousness, justice, decency and maturity.

That's the rule and the theory. The Biblical historian describes the centuries of tense struggle which Israel's religious leaders waged in order to separate out monotheism from baal worship. What they attempted and ultimately achieved was no less than a complete revision of the most cherished values of a long-lived and coherent culture.

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

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

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

I'll agree that the idol makers are out of business, but idolatry still thrives.

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

Don't we tend to project into the heavens a rather indulgent deity who forgives us for our foibles, applauds us vigorously for our

trivial accomplishments, encourages us in our low moments and who is careful not to reprimand us for enjoying leisure and security without thought to the needs of others? Who of us has not been tempted to love excessively a parent, a cause, a possession, a charismatic leader, a party, the State? The Israelites would have been surprised to hear some of their later descendants argue, 'it matters not what you believe as long as you do believe.' It very much matters what you believe. When I recite the Shema I am reminded forcefully that there is only one love which cannot be excessive and that all other commitments must be conditional.



Chapter 9

THE GOD WHO LETS US CRY

Late at night. It was the oldtimer's bunk and turn. Coffee, a few beers, and the feeling that it was their chance. I began by rambling on a bit about a recent trip to China.

The astronauts reported that the Great Wall was the only man-made object they could identify from space. Jewish history, like the Great Wall, is a monumental phenomenon. I feel satisfied in a special way that I am part of a truly significant enterprise which will outlive me.

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

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

- With all due respect, rabbi, aren't you deluding yourself? As a freshman, I took a survey course in world history. We spent a day on the Israelites and the Hebrew Bible. The prof talked about its original ideas but made it clear that the Bible's importance to western civilization was due largely to Christianity's later interest in it. After that lecture neither the Jewish people nor any Jewish contributions to civilization were mentioned until the last week when

we talked about the political implications of modern anti-semitism. He talked for some time about anti-semitism's long history: exiles, forced conversions, the ghetto, and the gas chamber. I draw no encouragement from our lengthy record as history's most available victim.

I quoted Justice Brandeis: "The Jew gave to the world its three greatest religions, reverence for law, and the highest conceptions of morality," but even as I did I knew that the judge's testimony did not really answer the question. You mention anti-semitism. Why do you think the Jew was such a frequent victim?

- The Christ-killer myth.

- The fact we wouldn't be baptized.

I look on the world's antipathy as a perverse tribute to the power of the ideas to which the Torah tradition witnesses. The privileged encouraged anti-semitism because they knew that democracy and justice, themes which are deeply rooted in the Hebrew Bible; and the ideologues of the left attacked those who represented that because they knew or sensed that the Torah tradition is concerned with the individual and rejected their impatient claim that valid ends justify any means and the subordination to the collective.

Kings claimed the right to rule as they saw fit, the Hebrew tradition rejected all claims to absolute authority. Priests and popes believed they controlled the keys to the kingdom, but Jews acted as if they knew that the Archangel Gabriel would let them in. Monks gambled their lives, denied basic physical needs, believing God valued a life of celibacy, while rabbis married and went out into the world. Theologians explained that the Bible foretold Christ but the Jews, who alone could read the original text, insisted otherwise. The Torah and its living representative, the Jew, challenged simply by being all

claims to arbitrary authority and privilege.

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

Prejudice begins in the myths of the bigoted, not in the acts of the calumniated. Anti-semitism is a pervasive cultural myth which has its roots in the New Testament text and retains much of its vitality because of the continuing reverence and authority ascribed to those documents. The gospel writers, aided and abetted by Paul, set up the Torah tradition as the straw man against which they could score polemical points. Judaism, stereotyped as a dry and lifeless legalism, provided an effective contrast for their emphases on the movement of the Holy Spirit. The chroniclers and apologetes of the early church whose writings comprise the New Testament twisted the facts to make the Jew rather than Pontius Pilate responsible for the Crucifixion, had the Jew cry out for Jesus' death, and mocked his tradition as deadly to the spirit. It didn't hurt their argument that many in their largely Roman audience looked on Jews as enemies of legitimate authority who had revolted against imperial authority and who refused to submit to the orderliness of law.

The early Church went further and developed what Jules Isaac has called a theology of contempt whose basic thesis was that God had sentenced the Jews to eternal wandering and ordered that the Temple be destroyed as punishment for their crimes. Would any God-fearing person go against God's will? It was not hard to infer that Christians obeyed God when they forced the Jew to wear a demeaning costume, denied the Jew standing in law, and set up the rules of apartheid which governed Christian-Jewish relations for fifteen hundred years. The Greek orthodox theologian, Nicholas Berdyaev, said it well: "Perhaps the saddest thing to admit is that those who rejected the

Cross have to carry it, while those who welcomed it are so often engaged in crucifying others."

- There are prejudices and prejudices. I've always wondered why anti-semitism continues to appeal to so many so powerfully. Why didn't it weaken once the centuries as most myths do?

Because there we were. Our presence kept alive ideas and values which challenged the self-confident assumptions of the majority. Christianity claimed to be the truth, but the Jew was obstinate and would not see 'the truth'. For those to whom Christian teachings seemed self-evident, Jewish non-agreement, even after patient explanation, could only be explained as due to a spiritual blindness, a deformity God had placed on all Jews until the Second Coming.

We choose as victims those who remind us of our limitations or who by their existence challenge cherished beliefs. The Protestant theologian, Karl Barth, put it this way: "By being hostile to the Jewish people the world simply proves that it is the world: blind and deaf and stupid in the ways of God, as they are visibly before it in the existence of this people." A century ago the ministers of the Czar were quite candid about their policy of deliberately forcing a massive exodus of Jews from Russia. They identified Jews with subversive ideas like democracy and freedom which were unwelcome in that absolutist society. The bearers of these ideas were to be quarantined, converted, or expelled. For much the same kind of reason the medieval church, not only locked up the Hebrew Bible lest the faithful read and question official doctrine, but forbade those who could read the text, the Jews, from discussing it with Christians lest they be led into heresy. To probe into the causes of anti-semitism is to understand something of what the Jew has meant to civilization.

- I'm not sure I like the idea of being a whipping boy because

the world is protective of familiar ideas and unwarranted privileges.

It's not been an unrelieved horror story. During the Biblical period there was nothing particularly bitter about the Jewish experience, and in many places there have been extended periods of quiet settlement. But the fact remains that by human standards the world is not a fair place and many Jews haven't had a fair share. Unfortunately, the 'why' can't be answered any more than we can explain why are some born to luxury and some into the poverty of Bangladesh. The question to which faith suggests an answer is, shall we bless God or blame God for making the world as it is.

- Bless God?

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

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

Not all Jews are sensitive or charitable or committed to social justice; but a remarkable number were and are. The real Jew was in many ways a quite remarkable fellow. The ghetto was a dismal place whose high walls rarely let in the sunlight, but within this cramped area Jews constructed a remarkably compassionate community, full of cultural and welfare institutions which preserved the family and mitigated the social and psychological cost of persecution. That the Jewish family retained a measure of cohesion and the community a measure of

dignity testifies to the functional value of a Torah-consecrated way of life.

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

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

I answered that God had not performed the operation or decided to have it performed. The mistakes were medical ones. If we praise God for freedom, a mind and will of our own, then we must be prepared for actions and decisions which are harmful or undesired. The blessing of freedom is that it turns life into an exciting challenge. The price of freedom is that we may blunder or decide to be self-centered. The blessing is medical research. The price medical error.

- What has this to do with Auschwitz?

Auschwitz is the other side of civilization. German engineers built Auschwitz, not God. They also did some remarkable atomic research. You can't have the one without the possibility of the other.

- What kind of God would create such a world?

What kind of God wouldn't? Would you want to live as a prisoner of your instincts?

If space ship earth were paradise what challenge would there

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

- But why doesn't God stop war?

Because we're adults not angry children who need to be pulled apart by a gym instructor. How will we learn if we don't have to suffer the consequences of our actions?

- But we don't seem to learn.

Is that God's problem or ours?

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

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

An anonymous prophet who lived among the Judean exiles in Babylon offered an image which you might want to think about. Those were difficult years. The Temple had been destroyed. Jerusalem had been razed. As exiles the Judeans were subject to the orders of others. A new question faced those who thought about the Jewish religion. How could a slave people serve God? What did an exiled people whom this prophet described as prisoners and little esteemed contribute to the unfolding of history. He answered his own question. Their role was to

be God's suffering servants. They were to proclaim God's will by example and by word to nations comfortable with idolatry who didn't want to be disturbed. The sleeper wants only to squash the noisy mosquito which buzzes around his head so that he can go back to his slumber, "so Israel was despised, forsaken of man, a people of pain from whom others hid their faces." Israel is the nagging conscience of the world. As long as Israel remains, the world's sleep will be fitful.

- But why lay all this on the Jews?

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

- That's a copout.

Only if you believe everything can be explained. The Torah tradition rests ultimately on faith.

- But the world never seems to learn.

I'm not sure of that. Are the death camps the whole truth? What about Hitler's bomb shattered bunker in Berlin and 1948 and the creation of the State of Israel? Think again about the mysterious significance of Jewish history.

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

I know, and I cry and remind myself of what I do not understand and of the psalmist's faith: "though he slay me, yet will I believe in Him." I don't have answers, but I know this much, that much of our problem comes from a controlling image of God which is, to put it kindly, childish. Over the centuries the Torah tradition has fought a brave battle to disabuse us of the image of God as a kindly Heavenly Grandfather. You shall not make any graven images. Why not? Because any image suggests that God can be described.

- But the prayer book speaks of God as kind and merciful and just.

And it also uses the phrase, "the Holy One, praised be He," to remind us that God's kindness and mercy depend on a wisdom deeper than any we can imagine. We are told not to assume that God's actions must conform to conventional standards in order to be accepted as just or good. God knows our needs before we are ever conscious of them and His goodness is implicit in creation rather than expressed by His listening to our prayers and granting us our desires.

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

- But why would a benevolent God place in us our evident capacity for mischief?

We're back to the paradox that if God were to restrict man's freedom and power He would be narrowing our responsibilities and diminishing our control over our lives. If our capacity for mischief were diminished, so would our capacity for significant achievement. The point is God did not make us inadequate to the moral challenges we face.

- But six million were killed.

And many millions more. Jews were not the only victims. You ask for reasons. Reasons are words. These events are elemental and beyond reason's grasp. They cannot be explained, but they can be transcended. Ultimately reason must give way to faith if we are not to be paralyzed by doubt. If life were reasonable, people would never have created religions. Remember religion's function is to confirm and affirm an ultimate purpose - to prove that what we do is worth the

doing. Faith allows us to carry on, . . . Early in the sixteenth century Solomon ibn Verga told this story in a history describing the persecution and exile of the Jews of Spain and Portugal.

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

That poor man's steadfastness is a paradigm of the man of faith. His words only repeat the Psalmist's pledge: "though He (God) slay me, yet will I believe in Him." Faith describes convictions held despite contradictory experiences. The Hebrew word for faith is emunah which comes from a root which means holding firm.

* Holding firm to what?

To a recognition of the possibilities of life. To the discovery of the holy dimensions of our existence.

- Is there really something beyond and behind the world we struggle in?

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

- Are we?

I think not. Recent history cannot be read as unrelieved tragedy. Sweeping political and social changes are taking place. The masses are coming alive and their individuality and potential is being revealed. An unsettled society is full of frustration and potential violence; but the measure of our potential for violence is

also a measure of our potential for effective change. You can't have the one without the other. The ancients knew this. Almost every scenario about the messianic age assumes that it will be preceded by a time of unprecedented trouble. The most famous of these images is a homely one. Birth is preceded by birth pangs. The Messianic Age, according to tradition, will be preceded by the birth pangs of the Messiah.

- Where does such faith come from?

It's a matter of opening up the inner eye, of seeing what is always there but which we rarely notice, being preoccupied as we are with the routine demands of life. I quote a few lines from Abraham J. Heschel:

Faith does not spring out of nothing. It comes with the holy dimensions of our Faith does not detach man from thinking. It does not suspend reason. It is opposed, not to knowledge, but to indifferent aloofness to the essence of living. Faith means to hold small things great, to take light matters seriously, to distinguish the common and the passing from the aspect of the lasting. . . Faith is a dynamic, personal act, flowing between the heart of man and the love of God. . . Faith is the insight that life is not a self-maintaining private affair, not a chaos of whims and instincts, but an aspiration, a way, not a refuge.

- That's a little too poetic for me; but I think I see what you're driving at. Let's not get detoured into a discussion of faith. The question was: Why have the Jews suffered more than any other group?

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

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

Deuteronomy offers one explanation: you get what you deserve. I'm talking about covenant theology, the old idea that God rewards loyalty and punishes disloyalty. The prophets who applied this grading

system to Jewish history insisted that Israel's sufferings - in their time this meant bad harvests and military defeat - were the result of the community's failure to live up to the terms of the covenant. This view provided, until our day, the myth through which the Jew explained to himself his history. Essentially, it's a we-get-what-we-signed-on-for thesis. At Sinai Jews agreed to the covenant terms, including a list of rewards for obedience and punishments for default. The prophets of Israel "heard" God "render judgment". When defeat came it was seen as a deserved punishment, "Because they sell the righteous for silver and the needy for a pair of shoes and trample the head of the poor in the dust of the earth."

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

So do I. The writers of apocalypse who followed the prophets downplayed the idea that we get what we deserve and insisted that God determines the course of history for His own purposes. I believe that the reward of the good deed is the deed itself. I don't believe that life operates like a classroom, that hard and conscientious work guarantees good grades. I've seen some healthy and prosperous bastards. Job's challenge to his comforters who defended the reality of retribution was based solidly on experience and cannot be blinked away; yet, I must add that over time there does seem to be something of a balancing out. Israel is, and many a more powerful empire is not. Israel's record refracts some fine human qualities. There are spiritual rewards which do not depend on wealth or security: "Better a small morsel and quiet therewith than a house full of feasting and strife."

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

On a human level they had something to say.

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

Job was also told that suffering represents a trial which allows God to measure our character. Presumably, if we are steadfast we will enjoy God's grace, if not in this world, then in the World to Come.

- That suggests that God may be a bit of a sadist.

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

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

I look on suffering as part of the given in life. Much suffering is avoidable, certainly more than we generally admit. God did not build Auschwitz and Maidanek. German engineers did, but some is not. To live is to be bruised. The test is to master our condition and not be defeated by it.

I find it terribly sad when someone says that you get what you deserve. It's one of those terribly dangerous half-truths for it becomes the idea that the well-off and well-placed are enjoying their just desserts.

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

- Are you saying that God is indifferent to the individual's fate?

Do you remember the end of the Book of Job? God does not explain himself to Job. God simply reveals His majesty to him. "Where were you when I rolled out the Heavens?" In a long poem God reveals the mysterious and vast operation of creation, to which Job submits: "I know that You can do anything. . . I had heard of You, the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees You. Therefore, I abhor my words and repent. . ."

Walter Kaufman, in an interesting work called The Faith of a Heretic, describes Job's response as the result of Job's confronting the "tragic power" of the world. "This is the ultimate truth of philosophy. There is a power beyond us and the power makes no sense except that it is there, and man must, as best he can and with what composure and equanimity he can muster, simply accept life on its terms." I think Kaufman is mistaken in his analysis of the meaning of Job when he defines tragic power as the ultimate reality. The God Who reveals Himself to Job in the whirlwind reveals not cold and indifferent power but creative power. God seems to be saying: creation is not a chaotic structure but a well-designed universe. There is a mysterious and wonderful order. If Job cannot fathom the totality of that purpose he comes to sense it.

From the point of view of the Torah tradition Kaufman is a heretic. He does not deny God but he denies that there is a creative purpose. Faith begins with a recognition of that purpose. Genesis one

uses as a refrain after each act of creation: "And God saw that it was good." I often end a service with a benediction taken directly from the Psalms: "Religion, as we have seen, discovers the order hidden in chaos and takes as its orders the manifestation in everyday life of the order which underlies life."

- Job was a single sufferer and the whole thing was a test. Let's talk about facts and not a piece of fiction. How can you have faith in purpose and order in the face of the Holocaust?

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

- Eichmann and his colleagues organized the Final Solution; and God did not interfere. Millions prayed for relief and none was sent.

Do you remember the story I told a few days ago about Moses visiting the Academy of Akiba and being astonished at many of the teachings being quoted as the law of Moses? I didn't complete the story as the Talmud reports it. After God had reassured Moses that what Akiba was teaching was in fact Torah, Moses says to God: 'How is it that knowing such a genius would arise, you gave the Torah through me?' To which God answered, 'Be silent, such is My decree.'

God then allowed Moses to see Akiba's life and his death. He was burned alive by the Romans during the Bar Kochba Rebellion and his skin sold in the marketplace. Moses was appalled: 'Is this the reward for such learning and devotion?' 'Be silent, for such is My decree.'

- I'm appalled.

Some things must be accepted. Our sages defined atheism not as the denial of the existence of God, the Walter Kaufman's of the world are prepared to use God's name for their mindless power, but as the denial of God's justice: Le'it din ve'leit dayan, there is no justice and there is no judge. Evidence of God's Providence is, to say the least, inconclusive. How explain Akiba's martyrdom or the fate of the Jewish people? It is precisely here that the Jew must make his leap into faith.

- You can't leave it there.

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

- That's not enough.

I know. No argument can satisfy the sufferer. When my heart aches, sweet reason is not the medicine I need. At such times I want to be listened to and not to be talked at. Any explanation offered me seems irrelevant. I need love not logic. God did not explain Himself to Job, but spoke to him of the incomparable majesty of creation and, inferentially, of the Creator. "Where were you when I laid out the Heavens?" There are questions which find their answer only when we allow ourselves to feel the depths of purpose behind the everyday confusions. Logic is useless to us here. We grasp at this kind of meaning intuitively.

I have been a rabbi for nearly thirty years and have spent a fair amount of time close to illness and grief. As a young rabbi I

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

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

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

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

Whenever one is confronted with an inescapable, unavoidable situation, whenever one has to face a fate which cannot be changed, e. g. an incurable disease, such as an incurable cancer; just then one is given a last chance to actualize the highest value, to fulfil the deepest meaning, the meaning of suffering. For what matters above all is the attitude we take towards suffering, the attitude in which we take our suffering upon ourselves.

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

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

There is a pragmatic side to the Torah tradition which says, 'live, do the right, don't ask too many questions.' The Hebrew letter Bet is the first letter of the first word in the Torah. Why B rather than A? Simple, the sages said. The Hebrew letter is formed by three strokes which enclose three sides of a square, "ב". Since Hebrew is written from right to left, the missing side opens towards

the flow of the text. Set, they said, was chosen as a sign that the Jew should read what follows, the Torah, carefully and not worry too much about what cannot be known: what is above, what below and what preceded creation.

- You know, you've really not answered the problem of suffering.

I know. The Mishnah quotes: The reason for the prosperity of the village was for the troubles of the good is not of our hand. In explaining religion, as in everything else, there are limits. What we have instead of Judaism is a method to transcend confusion whose purpose is to make us see possibility and promise even in the darkest hour. Before death, the dying spoke the Shema. After death the mourners speak the Kaddish. Neither prayer mentions death. Each affirmed God. The Kaddish also speaks of the inevitable coming of

. The psalmist spoke wisely when he wrote: "Seek and you shall find." The statement has as much promise as we see in it. The God who lets us cry calls on us to affirm.

Chapter 10

THE GENERATION GAP, GUILT AND GOD

Shabbat afternoon. That morning service, written and organized by Institute members, had been read and enjoyed. The mood was mellow.

- "I like it here. There's open space. There's song and touching. I don't like services at home. The pews are uncomfortable, the service is a set piece, everyone's dressed up and uptight."

How often at home do you prepare for a service over four days? You walk in cold. You've been thinking of classes or finances. You sit yourself down and challenge the service to move you.

- But here there's a guitar, open shirts and a sense of community.

The forms of Jewish worship conform to cultural style as much as to ancient commandments. I have worshipped in Casablanca and Bombay and in the Sephardic congregations of Jerusalem, and I discovered in each of these places chants, customs, and hymns unknown to me. Yemenite Jews sit cross-legged on prayer rugs. Moroccan Jews chant the whole of the Song of Songs before the Sabbath. When there were shrines, sacrifices, and priests, Jews had shrines, sacrifices, and priests. In a culture when worshippers and courtiers prostrated themselves to express humble submission, Jews, like Muslims to this day, made similar obeisance. Pews and a gowned clergy are eighteenth century forms. The guitar is late twentieth century.

People have different needs. In former times the divisions were geographic. Today they tend to be generational. A youth culture is a modern phenomenon. Boys used to go to work at thirteen. Separate youth group services testify to the fact that today's boys don't live

and work with their fathers. They're more with their peers, in a different atmosphere than their parents, and consequently their attitudes, aesthetics, and play are distinct.

You don't want to sit in pews, pews are straight and confining. You're not ready to sit quietly and listen to somebody else. You want dialogue, not a sermon. You want intensity, to do it yourself, not the calm of an organ playing over you. You want commitment, activity, proof of conviction, and participation in a group which will feel close and warm. Well and good. There always have been a variety of ways to express one's faith. Maimonides worshipped at home with a few disciples in quiet dignity next to the bustle of an active synagogue whose noise he deplored. The problem is not guitar or organ, or open shirt or ties, but how to make sure the spirit is full and catching and the environment representative of the Torah spirit.

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

- Who's right?

Why must any of the three approaches be wrong? The question isn't one of form but of motivation. Is the spirit sincere?

- Isn't the prayer book called a Siddur, and doesn't the Hebrew mean order? There is a formal order of service. How can you approve disorder?

In worship hitlahavot, genuineness, takes precedence over form. The medieval synagogue was a tumultuous and noisy place. Jews stayed for hours and gossiped even as they worshipped. They were familiar with each other and with their God. The medieval Jew had nothing else to do and no other place to go. There were no movies, no radio or television, probably no other public space in his town; so he lengthened the service and, not accustomed to privacy, denied it a place.

Emancipation changed all this. The emancipated Jew no longer had the enforced leisure born of underemployment which had allowed his ancestors to linger in synagogue most of the day. He had to work long hours, so the service had to be cut. As part of a larger world, he came to appreciate its aesthetics. Middle-class burghers sat silently in pews. The familiar swaying came to seem inappropriate. Jews began to live in homes with private space. As decorum and discipline took over some of the old sense of involvement was lost. The balance shifted subtly and the congregation became increasingly an audience, and worship tended to become what it had never been before and never ought to be - a spectator sport.

- We're emancipated Jews.

In our times needs and attitudes have changed again. We're intrigued by the imagination more than the mind. Soul has replaced decorum. The guitar replaced the organ. Congregations are experimenting with dance. Whatever the shortcomings of the new style services, they have, at least, the virtue of liveliness and in worship immediacy is critical.

- You talk of guitar music as a sign of the youth culture.

We belong to an orthodox synagogue where instrumental music on the Sabbath is forbidden.

The Temple in Jerusalem featured a choir and orchestra of Levites and, you're right, when it was destroyed instrumental music was ruled out of the synagogue as a sign of mourning for the destroyed Temple. During the Renaissance some communities in Italy allowed organ music in the synagogue except on the Sabbath and holidays. The prohibition was a memorial one rather than an attempt to impose a rigid form. I look on the issue pragmatically. God, we are told, should be worshipped in the beauty of holiness, and beauty is in the eye of the beholder. Each congregation must decide what setting inspires them. There is no right or wrong. Why is a cantor more appropriate than a choir? Why is one musical setting more appropriate to a prayer than another? Priests danced in the Jerusalem Temple. The medieval synagogue had no pews. Kabbalists held all-night vigils. The Hasidim often told of the illiterate shepherd boy who played his flute in the synagogue on Rosh Hashanah because he didn't know the Hebrew words, and that his was the voice welcomed into Heaven. It's not the medium but the message.

- But isn't the medium also the message?

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

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

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

the freeing of the imagination through a spiritual happening.

- I don't understand.

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

- You make worship parochial. Prayer is an elemental and universal form of expression. Why do you insist that a service have a Jewish atmosphere? Aren't good thoughts enough? I once heard Harvey Cox talk on worship. Cox is a minister on the faculty of the Harvard Divinity School who believes that the church takes itself too seriously; that the religious moment must be a celebration of possibility, a freeing of the imagination and a passionate encounter of the symbols of the powers we do not control and only dimly comprehend. That made sense to me.

The purpose of worship is not an undifferentiated sense of the sacred but a Jewish expression of the sacred.

Worship and prayer are not synonymous.

- I thought services were for prayer.

Not really. The Sabbath hour is a worship hour.

- What's the difference?

The dictionary defines prayer in terms of petition and entreaty. Most of us equate prayer with the sudden surge of emotion which comes over us when we are pushed beyond our resources or unable to contain our joys. I prayed when my father was deathly ill. I prayed when each of my children was born. Those prayers were spoken late at night in a hospital corridor and not in a synagogue. Abe Lincoln used to say that he often found himself on his knees because he had no place else to go. Prayer cannot be scheduled. To be sure, there have been times when I have prayed during a service. I came troubled. The music calmed my spirits. The sense of community, the

quiet, an awareness of the presence of God unlocked my heart. But I can number these moments.

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

Wherever he finds himself, the Jew can find a service with which he will be familiar, feel rooted and at home. Congregation overcomes the inevitable sense of loneliness which we feel when life takes us away from the familiar. Worship allows us to live in the spiritual order of the Jewish people.

- But forms restrict. I want to be genuine and during worship I am asked to read somebody else's words. At services I often think I am being transformed into a parrot. They give me a book, tell me to

open to such and such a page and read. They expect me to feel prayerful precisely between 8:15 and 9:30 on Friday night. I always feel I'm being directed by some anonymous 'they'.

Spontaneity is not the consummate value. Prayer is instinctive and being instinctive it can be foolish, petty, misdirected, or self-deluding. Men can and will pray as the spirit moves them. When we worship and use the classic poetry of the psalms or hymns sanctified by centuries of faith we recognize that worship has the extra dimension of spiritual grace. We cannot all write Shakespearean poetry or Bach's music but we can still make it our own; we can open our hearts to it and enrich and expand ourselves by sharing and appropriating it. The central act of worship is the reading of Torah, but it is never left there. There is interpretation, an opening of our spirit to the meaning of God's words. At worship we signify a willingness at least to listen, really to listen, to the commands which holiness imposes. Here is our past, our mythic language, our becoming, the mysterious power of God's words still instructing us as He did our fathers at Sinai.

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

Traditional worship is chanted, minor-keyed, full of movement. A Jew davens, a colloquialism which suggests a far more active posture

than sitting in a pew. He loses himself in words which came from nearly every century of his people's life. The Siddur has form, but it's not a closed book. The forms took their basic shape in Mishnaic times, but much has been added and, from time to time, elements have been dropped. In the Siddur you will find what those who swam in the river in other ages felt about their experience. Siddur allows us to sing along with King David and Judah ha Levi. We remind ourselves of the martyrs whose blood commands our loyalty and of the poets whose images inspire our thoughts. There is petition in the liturgy but also the reminder that "we do not know whether what we ask for is for our good", and if we look carefully we notice that requests are phrased in the third person plural, 'we', 'not I'. What is asked for is the fulfillment of hopes we all share: health, a just social order, a return to Zion, the messianic age. "Grant us peace."

Worship is artificial in the sense that all civilization is artificial; that is, it is a creation of human design. It's unfortunate that people tend to use the label "creative service" for a service which tosses out centuries of literary genius for a few paragraphs written in haste. I find it naive to believe that we cannot relate creatively to another's words. Would you say that Rubenstein or Heifetz are not creative musicians because they play scores written by Chopin and Beethoven? The pianist creates new music even as he recreates another's music. The engaged worshipper participates fully and genuinely in the words of the psalmist or the poet. The Twenty-third Psalm belongs as much to me as to King David.

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

I, too, have been let down by a service. I have been put off by

a restless congregation and by an off-handed service. Many who come to the synagogue come to honor a friend or a friend's child and not to honor God. They are in no mood to pay attention to the words or mood, and they send out unmistakable vibrations that they are not part of a worshipping congregation.

But, if I've been to services which failed to lift me out of myself, I've rarely been to a service which failed to bring me back to my Jewish self. However the material was presented there was always the familiar paragraphs. It was/is a way of touching base. During the day I am a husband, a father, a professional, an American citizen; here I am simply a Jew.

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

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

I've attended Evensong at King's College, Cambridge, and been moved, but I also noticed the values that were expressed by the architecture. The fellows and students were in an inner space behind a church screen. I was on the other side with the commoners. In the synagogue there are no separations based on class or rank. The informality of the synagogue reflects Judaism's commitment to democracy.

- You've made worship sound important. I've always thought of it as color.

It's the deed that counts. Where there is not motivation, the kinds of deeds we're talking about don't occur. When worship works, and it doesn't always, it provides the emotional electricity which binds Torah to an individual's life. We say: This I must do.

Worship has other important values not the least of which is that it answers the otherwise sticky question: What is Judaism? On an intellectual level we've got the problem of change and of a variety of positions; but in worship a certain number of the major themes are quietly affirmed. Far more than any other book, including the Bible, The Bible's in our library. The Talmud is in The Temple Library. The Siddur is in our hands and many of its words are in our hearts. The soul of the individual Jew and of our people is mirrored in its liturgy and ceremony; somehow, during worship soul speaks to soul, the teaching takes the wings of song and imbeds itself deep within our psyche.

- Why can't a synagogue service have majesty?

It can. I, too, want a service which catches me up in a sense of the divinity reaching out to me from behind the surface of life, from within the teachings of Torah and from deep within the history of the Jewish people. There must be song and feeling and the presence of Kedushah, holiness. Song releases the spirit. Poetic language touches the soul. The synagogue room shuts out the work-a-day world. There is a sense of what we would like the world to be like: warm-hearted folk, not cold-eyed people; chant, not cacaphony; worthwhile thoughts, not cruel ones; a sense of closeness to God. A congregation united in expression refracts a holiness which suggests all that has made the Torah civilization possible.

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

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

- I can buy worship as an opportunity to live in a Jewish ethos and as a celebration of God and life's possibilities, but I can't buy the word sin or the idea of confession. It's too heavy. The world gives me enough stress without my being made uncomfortable when I come to the synagogue. Anyway, most sins are society's fault.

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

How would you organize Yom Kippur which is, after all, a time for soul searching?

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

I think of Yom Kippur as a grand celebration of possibility, and it's the worship's emphasis on sin and confession which makes it so; but, before I draw this out, let me ask if you've read B. F. Skinner.

- Yes. He's the educator and psychologist who believes that we can become only what our genetic endowment and our environment allows us to be. I agree with him.

In Skinner's view frustration and failure prevent us from fulfilling our potential. To eliminate failure Skinner created a mechanical environment, a learning machine, which would provide the child all the information needed to put ideas together so as to form new ideas, and eliminate the frustrations associated with learning by creating a continuing sense of accomplishment. We don't need to spend time on the technology of Skinner's device except to say it was designed to insure that mistakes would not occur and to acknowledge instantly the correctness of a student's work so that the young person would learn without frustration; no guilt, no mental or emotional block. Presumably, using such a computerized learning device, society could not only do away with classrooms, teachers and grade pressures but tension and frustration. Skinner's box was based on a theory of some merit which insists that the environment in which we live substantially affects how we live, what we can accomplish, the questions we ask, and the answers we arrive at. We tend to think of ourselves as if we are autonomous beings when, in fact, we are in rather significant ways what our parents and our society have allowed us to become. Conditioning determines much about us. The fact that we speak English, for instance, means that some ideas can be expressed easily and others perhaps not at all. Our habits are American-bred and, therefore, we think of ourselves differently than an Indian villager or a Japanese worker thinks of himself. All that's not particularly new. Skinner's popularity lay in the fact that

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

- I like the idea of no sin.

Many do. We live in a confusing age and are never quite sure what is right socially or politically. We like the word crime. Crime is what somebody else does and gets punished for. Sin hits too close to home. Sin suggests that our life isn't what it should be and we are responsible; but we're quite ready to argue that the triviality of our lives is not our fault but the fault of our parents or of being raised at a particular time in a particular place.

The Torah tradition admits to a part of Skinner's argument: environment does play a role and so do a number of special factors such as age and mental competence. But the whole ethos of the Torah tradition cries out: "they [the commandments] are not too hard for you. Choose. You are responsible for your actions and your character." God did not fashion us as robots but as conscious creatures, capable of thinking through the consequences of our actions and ultimately capable of acting on our decisions. Skinner is simply and vitally wrong. We do have a measure of freedom and the inner resources to use our freedom wisely.

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

There are extenuating factors, but the crux of this debate is not on whether there are special factors but whether a competent adult is in fact competent to shape his or her life. I would agree that children raised in good homes with parents who care for them and correct them have a better chance of developing a coherent sense of self than a street child who is raised carelessly, perhaps cruelly; but environment is not all. Some who are raised in good homes become bums. Some who are raised on the street become great people. In life everything, including freedom, has limits, but the grandeur of the Torah tradition is that it insists that we act in the area of moral judgment as if these boundaries did not exist. In terms of ethical standards we have been given by God the artist's gift of dominating the material before us, and the more trained and skilled we become the greater our freedom of action. Animals are ruled by instinct; behaviorists like Skinner emphasize that side of our nature. God made the animals, each according to its kind. An animal remains what he was born. "Then God said, 'let us make man in our image and likeness'." The human animal can become a human being.

- Well and good, but why add guilt to our other problems? Why not live in a world of no-fault morality?

The fact that I sin points directly to my potential. No-fault would imply that I could not be other than I am, and that's simply not so. Sin implies possibility.

The concept of sin reminds me that I am morally responsible for talents untapped, sensitivities unused, and responsibilities unmet. It's only when I cease to feel that I can change or grow that the world becomes a gray and hapless place. Sin forces me to consider the more I can do and must do and will do; and it's that "can" and that "must" and that "will" out of which progress, a better future and maturity, a better self, will be formed. Sin says I'm responsible and that's

always an encouraging thought.

- But sin is such a heavy thought.

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

- But you never get out from under.

The Torah's goal is not purity but growth.

- But what about guilt?

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

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