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

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Come On In, the Water's Fine, unpublished manuscript, third draft, chapters 1-5, pages 1-123, 1983.

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Chapter 1

DOING WHAT COMES NATURALLY

Our discussion began with challenge.

- Being Jewish or being anything ought to make a difference in a person, but I can't see that it does. The Jacksons lived next door. I went to Sabbath School and John went to Sunday School, but as far as I can tell the only difference in our upbringing was that I got presents on Chanukah and he on Christmas. We were raised with much the same rules. We went to the same schools. We took out the same girls. We liked the same music. We cared about the environment and Vietnam. We were different, of course, everyone is; but it was not because I was a Jew and he a Christian. Perhaps if I had been raised in an orthodox home and gone to a day school I might not feel this way, but I wasn't, I didn't, and I don't think of Jew as anything but a label. Being a Jew is only a small part of me and not a particularly important part. Why should I want it to be more?

I can't give you a quick answer, certainly not one that will satisfy you.

- Why not?

Identity questions are worked out in life. My reasons for leading an active Jewish life correspond to my need and my feelings. You and I are different people and I've no way of knowing if any of my answers would seem compelling to you.

- If I ever need a religion I'll look around until I find the one that seems to fit my needs. Until then, I'll reserve judgment.

No one acquires a religion by shopping around and picking whatever happens to catch his eye. The religion of our home is lodged in our soul long before we begin to think critically about its values. We are born into a family and a specific community and culture. It's only later, as our mind and imagination develop, that we become selfconscious and begin to make judgments about the way we've been trained. A religious identity is not something we can put on and take off at will. Our ideas and our loyalties change, we're not prisoners of the

past; but the past never ceases to be an important part of us. The suit that will attract us will be cut in a familiar pattern.

I'm much more of a free agent than that. In college I chose my major. When I left college I chose my career. I chose my wife. We chose to have a family. I'll choose my faith.

Did you see a Francois Truffaut film called The Wild Child? It's about an infant who was abandoned by his parents and raised by wolves. When he was about nine years old, farmers found him. At that point he was not only illiterate and fearful of human contact but unaware that he could use speech to communicate his ideas. His environment had been wild and so was he.

- But that's a movie.

It was based on an actual case. Without family, schools, books, music, friends, the best and brightest among us would develop only rudimentary survival skills. Our reach is circumscribed by what others do for us and the opportunities society makes available to us. There are no self-made people. George Bernard Shaw said it with customary verve: "Independence, that's middle-class blasphemy. We are all dependent on one another,every soul of us on earth."

- If you're saying be a Jew because your parents are Jews, I won't buy. I don't vote the way my parents do. We have different tastes in music and art. We don't agree on many things. If I don't accept their politics, and I don't, why should I accept their religion?

You've mistaken my point. I'm not arguing that you should or must follow submissively in your parents' footsteps, if that were true we wouldn't be having this discussion, but that like it or not, you've been deeply influenced by them. You spent your most impressionable years in their home. None of us escapes the imprint of conditioning. Judaism seems natural and confortable to me; Hinduism, despite a good bit of study, remains a distant abstraction.

- I could leave Judaism without ever looking back.

Don't be so sure. Bertrand Russell lost his belief in Christian doctrine as an undergraduate and never found any reason to return to the fold. Yet, when he visited Athens he found, to his surprise, that a small Byzantine church meant more to him than the Parthenon. He wrote in his Autobiography that this unexpected reaction made him realize that his Christian upbringing had forever influenced his feelings. He would always be a familiar in the Christian world and an outsider, albeit an informed one, in the classic world.

- We're not prisoners of our upbringing. There are conversions.

They're generally painful experiences. It's not easy to become someone else.

- It's the sham and posturing that gets me. I choke every time I read of those Washington prayer breakfasts where senators, lobbyists, and generals begin the day with bowed heads, asking God to give them the strength to spend the rest of the day manipulating the levers of power.

How do you know that all these men are hypocrites?

- They're either hypocrites or ignorant about what religion's all about.

Aren't you simply saying that you're angry with American politics?

- They're hypocrites. I remember that when the negotiations at Camp David about a Near Eastern peace were completed a public ceremony was organized at the White House for the formal signing of the accords at which each of the heads of state, Jimmy Carter, Menachem Begin and Anwar Sadat made an appropriate speech in which he quoted the same few lines from Isaiah: "They shall beat their swords into plough shares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation shall not lift up sword against nation. Neither shall they learn war anymore." The next day Sadat and Begin went up to Capitol Hill to ask Congress to sell more arms to their respective military forces, and President Carter held a press conference in which he explained the treaty in the cold terms of geo-politics.

Politicians have been known to spice their speeches with a Bible text to make their position seem upright and righteous, but that doesn't prove that they don't believe their position to be principled or that they're unscrupulously manipulating their constituents' feelings. I remain convinced that these three men spoke from the heart. Each is a confirmed believer, in fact a rather traditional believer. Jimmy Carter taught Sunday School for years. Menachem Begin practices orthodox Judaism, and Anwar Sadat followed the Sunni tradition of Islam.

- Then explain, if you can, the quick shift from peace talk to Pentagon talk.

- The major religions teach that as long as the world remains unredeemed, the wise combine idealism with prudence.

- Isaiah didn't rush off after his speech to a session of Judah's Security Council.

Isaiah was a prophet, not a bureaucrat. Moreover, he was describing a utopian future, not getting out an agenda for arms reduction talks.

- How do you know that?

From his language. This particular speech begins: "It shall come to pass in the End of Days." In Biblical Hebrew 'the End of Days' is a specific term for the era of everlasting peace which will begin after life as we know it is brought to an end, and God creates a new world in which "the lion shall lie down with the lamb, and a little child shall lead them." The End of Days will be quite different from the here and now.

- You're complicating a simple issue. If people who claim to be religious don't work for peace, they're hypocrites. Bombs and religion don't mix.

A dead peacemaker is no longer a peacemaker. Judaism was the first major religion to project the vision of universal peace, but our sages also taught: 'if one comes to kill you, kill him first.' Until the Messiah comes, I'll pressure our government to negotiate arms reduction, the arms race is a costly

and suicidal folly, but I'll not demand that we disarm ourselves if no one else will.

- I guess we mean different things by religion. Define your terms.

Harvey Cox describes religion as "that cluster of memories and myths, rites and customs, ideas and institutions, that pulls together the life of a person or group into a meaningful whole." The religious need, the need to feel that what we're doing makes sense, is as basic and essential to our happiness as the need to love and be loved. We need to feel that the way we live is appropriate, that our commitments have been intelligently chosen, and that their effect will be consequential. We need to feel that there is more to life than eating, sex, work, illness and the grave. I didn't choose to be born. I would prefer not to die, but I can't do much to prevent it. I want to know why I'm alive and why so many confusing things happen to me. Our religion, any religion, assures its communicants that a certain kind of life is the right way to live and that if we follow certain instructions we'll be putting our days to good use. I could give you a number of sophisticated definitions of religion, but you'll understand if I quote Salvador de Madriaga: "Religion is all that we do to prove to ourselves that God is not mad." Religions are the cultural entities which will allow us to affirm and confirm life's inherent meaning. We can't do without this support.

- I could. I do.

You only think you do. Everyone's got a religion. Psychologists speak of a will to believe as one of the givens of our emotional makeup.

- I don't believe in God. I accept nothing on faith. My motto is: 'show me.' I don't allow myself to believe in anything I can't see, touch or quantify. I'm not religious.

Do you believe in love, beauty, joy?

- Love, beauty and joy are feelings everyone experiences. They're universal. Religion isn't. I've never had a religious experience and no one I know has. Most so-called religious experiences are forms of self hypnosis or mass hysteria.

Then mystics like Ezekiel, the Buddha, or Francis of Assissi are no more than deluded innocents.

- I'm sure that there are spiritual sensitives. Religion's a special talent, like a musical ear. It's not a universally shared emotion or need. I'm not built that way. I don't think most people are.

Mysticism is to religion as ecstasy is to love. It involves a heightening of a basic emotion. For most of us most of the time religion and love operate at a much lower emotional temperature. In its universal form, religion simply satisfies us that a particular way of thinking and living is valid and assures us that life isn't a pointless journey. Everyone needs the reassurance religion offers.

- I don't accept the Jewish religion or any other. I told you I work from facts.

Facts are useful only if we can fit them into a pattern. Without a religion which sanctifies a particular pattern of ideas and values, your facts are of little use to you.

-I don't believe in God.

I hate to disappoint you, but agnosticism or atheism do not necessarily qualify you as non-religious. Belief in God is only one of any number of possible unifying ideas which can inform a religion. A sense of Fate or the presumedly inexorable force of the Marxist dialectic will do as well.

- I don't believe in God or obey the dietary laws or any others for that matter.

You've still got a religion. Everyone does, otherwise we'd all be mad. Our religion is not the published teachings of a recognized religious body butthat cluster of ideas, values and hopes which we "know" to be right, that

is, accept on faith that cluster of ideas and institutions which guarantees to us that our lives have meaning.

- I don't see how you can call me religious. I've no particular faith and no particular need to believe.

Do you feel a need to order your life?

- I want to understand my world, but I look to science, not religion, to give me answers. Science clears away ignorance. Religions with their myths simply add to the confusion. I look on religion as a kind of sophisticated magic. Religion says light candles or make a pilgrimage and you'll get into Heaven. Lighting a candle certainly won't help you get into Heaven since there's no such place.

You're arguing against specific religious teachings and I'm talking about the function of religion. You're saying that blessing the Sabbath lights won't earn me Brownie points. I agree, but I would add that reciting the blessing can, and often does, remind us that we can light the darkness, that we don't have to live in the shadows.

- Lighting candles or keeping kosher won't get you into Heaven.

Heaven is a myth which tells us not to give up our dreams. I don't believe that there's any such place, but I know that all of us need to acknowledge life as more than a brief and hapless journey to the grave. Religions are in the encouragement business and Heaven is a projection of our most cherished dreams. You'll find Heaven in most of the world's religions.

- Precisely, and it's all pie in the sky--a con game.

Not at all. Inculcating hope is the business of religion. We're more often down than up and the promise of our religion reminds us that there are hopes that do come true. If we didn't have our myths our souls would starve to death. But there's no Heaven.

- There's no Heaven and there's no Messiah.

Religions generally hold out a number of promises: long life, health and wealth, the lasting significance of our labors, a Messiah, a messianic age, peace of mind, a Promised Land, triumph over enemies, Aryan conquest, the victory of the proletariat. As the old images lost some of their power the religions have emphasized promises which seem more creditable to the modern, liberal Judaism talks more of a Messianic Age than of a Messiah, and take pains to remind everyone that they had never encouraged anyone to take Heaven literally. Then, too, new religions have come on the scene which limit their promises to seemingly realistic propositions. Marxism promises Heaven on Earth rather than Heaven in Heaven.

- The Messiah hasn't come. He won't. He's a myth.

The Messiah hasn't come, may never, but for centuries this hope lifted the spirits of millions.

- My problem is not with the ancient myths but with our modern ones. Talk of a Messianic Age is just as pie-in-the-sky as messiah talk. We're more likely to be cindered in a nuclear war than settled in a peaceful society. The priests of a society make these promises tc keep people in line. It's a way of manipulating people.

Not so. The priests believed in Heaven every bit as much as the laity. The early Reformers sincerely believed that Pollyana was right and that the world was well on its way to a Messianic Age. These hopes reflect a society's will to believe that life is a challenging and significant journey rather than a pointless endurance contest. Without hope and a vision--in other words, a religion--each day is a burden. Caught up in a vision, each day becomes an opportunity.

- Or a frustration.

Better the frustration of a goal unattained than the dreariness of a life devoid of all purpose. We need a reason to get up in the morning.

- But that reason doesn't have to be a religious one.

What else can it be?

- I believe in social progress, in the mind and research, and in the possibility of political and social reform. My hopes and those of most of my friends have nothing to do with religion.

Oh, but they do.

- They're based on what I've learned and experienced, not on what Judaism has taught me.

Your hopes grow out of your faith in tomorrow. They're based on unprovable assumptions and the fact that they're shared by many shows that you live in a religious culture.

- You're giving religion the broadest possible definition, so broad, in fact, that I no longer recognize the religions I'm familiar with. I'll agree everybody needs to believe in something, but my beliefs have nothing to do with prayer or holidays, the paraphenalia of religion. Religion, as I understand the term, represents faith organized institutionally. I have no need of that kind of structure. Organized religion divides people. Look at Ireland, Iran and the Middle East. Religious leaders seem unable to resist telling everyone else what they must believe and do.

You're tilting with windmills. You can't have religion without some organization. An Abraham, Paul or Mohammed may express a new and compelling vision, but since we're social animals, not isolates, inevitably others are caught up in it, and since the new ideas need to be taught, its themes need to be celebrated and its teachings have to be put into practice as organization emerges.

- Look at the harm religions do, the Crusades, the Inquisition, 'holy' wars.

Some religious leaders are power brokers. Others come close to being saints. A religious organization is, after all, simply a group of people who share a religious way of life and, inevitably, some will be sensitive and others fanatic. Like it or not, every compellingreligious message inevitably goes public.

- And when it does it becomes commercial. A rabbi or a priest is just another guy earning a living.

Who probably could have chosen other and easier ways to make a living.

- Religions never let people alone. Some self-appointed guardian of public morals is always saying, "you can't read this book" or "you can't have an abortion."

One of the few "truths" I have discovered is that 'never' can never be said of any form of human behavior. Some religious groups promulgate their views by heavy-handed coercion, others by gentle example. Some aggressively convert the unenlightened. Others teach respect for the views of others. Protestantism gave us Prohibition and Sunday Blue Laws and this country's strong bias in favor of the integrity of the individual conscience.

- Protestants are now demanding that the school day begin with prayer and that Genesis I be made part of the science curriculum.

Some Christian groups lobbied for the prayer amendment. Others opposed it. The same is true of Creationism. The major religions are not monolithic. American Frotestantism includes the Moral Majority which is a throwback to the old Watch and Ward societies who policed Puritan New England and the National Council of Churches which has been accused of supporting revolutionaries who willingly resort to force.

- Some rabbis testified in favor of the Prayer Amendment.

More were vigorously opposed. Religious communicants share certain religious forms and a vocabulary of hope. They do not necessarily agree on matters of public policy. Those who favor the amendment argue that our schools need to have a clear sense of purpose and that only a faith rooted in God can provide that clear sense of purpose. Those who are opposed doubt that such prayer would strengthen the student's moral fibre and emphasize the separation of Church

True, and within a generation of the time Weizman had his knuckles slapped, schools rum by the orthodox like Yeshivah University had developed major departmerts in all the sciences.

- Censorship seems to attract religious folk. The Roman Church forced Galilee to recant. The Amsterdam Synagogue excommunicated Spinoza.

At least recognize the problem believers face. By definition and function a religion affirms a particular set of ideas and values, and the convinced obviously take it for granted that these ideas should be encouraged and promulgated and that ideas which conflict with their cherished convictions are not only wrong but threatening.

- That's what I've been saying. Religions stifle progress and research because they inevitably encourage us to close our minds to new ideas.

The problem is that religions are valuable to us precisely because they reinforce our commitment to certain principles. A religion without convictions is a contradiction in terms. The familiar image of God revealing the law to Moses is, among other things, a dramatic image of a religion's ability settling for us, once and for all, the debate over what is right or just. After Sinai Jews knew precisely how to define right and wrong. It was all set down in the Torah.

You're agreeing with me that religious folk have closed minds.

Some do. Not all. A religion may consecrate respect for other views as one of fundamental principle.

- I don't know any creed that begins, 'I am committed to open-mindedness.'

None of us is completely open-minded. If we were we would be empty-minded. I can see you shaking your head, but I'm sure that you have convictions from which no one could budge you and that you feel that ours would be a better world if everyone agreed with you. It might well be, but recognize that you've taken a stand. Dare I say it, you've closed your mind. The problem with any religion

and State and the avoidance of spiritual coercion as values which must not be compromised.

- Those who favor the Prayer Amendment are wrong.

I think so, too, but they obviously don't, and you have to remember that values are not like mathematics where every problem has only one right answer. Policy decisions grow out of presuppositions, the ideas we know to be right but cannot prove.

- I can still remember my shock when I learned in a Jewish Studies Seminar that the early rabbis had deliberately set aside all the writings of the Greek-speaking diaspora. Until then I'd never associated Jews with censorship.

- Chaim Weizmann in his biography describes how he hid his first science texts inside a large Talmud folio for fear that the Melamed would discover he was reading forbidden books and beat him for wasting his time.

Jewish institutions can be heavy-handed. They can also be remarkably open-minded. You were surprised because your 'Jewish' experience had led you to expect a more understanding approach. Your synagogue doesn't publish a list of acceptable movies or demand that members sign the agreement to a particular creed.

- There is never any excuse for censorship.

Again, that unfortunate 'never.' Both examples that have been cited come from periods of stressful change when leaders feared that Judaism might drown in a sea of unJewish ideas.

- Weizman's physics primer didn't threaten anyone.

It wasn't his book that worried his teachers. They had been suddenly exposed to a cultural world which they didn't understand and felt threatened by.

- You can't deny science. No one can.

is not that it's organized around unhealthy rather than life-enhancing values. What we "know" to be right, what our religion affirms to be right, may promote personal growth or social justice or it may stand in the way of our growth as persons or necessary social change. Think of all those Dutch Reformed Afrikaaners who "know" that apartheid is right and of all those church and synagogue members who "know" that the arms race is the ultimate folly.

- Again, you're labeling as religious ideas which have nothing to do with religion.

The Boer church celebrates a white Jesus and teaches that God meant the races to be separate. The mainline American denominations organize Peace and Disarmament seminars and demonstrations.

- Let's stay with the issues everyone accepts as religious. I'll say it again--I don't believe in any religious ideas. I don't believe in a personal God, in life after death, or that our prayers are answered. No one is at the other end of the line.

You believe in democracy and justice. You believe that our world can become a peaceful place. You believe that you can organize your life usefully. On what basis do you hold these convictions?

- Those aren't religious ideas. They're self-evident social science propositions. Everyone agrees, at least everyone who is neither a moron or a psychopath.

Not so. A billion Chinese believe that the individual must subordinate his ego to the collective. Social harmony, not personal initiative, is the ideal; the individual has no inalienable rights. The function of the state is to organize duties equitably and to see that everyone does what he's supposed to. Chairman Mao taught: "We must all learn the spirit of absolute selflessness. . .to proceed in all cases from the interests of the people and not from one's sold interest." A member doesn't tell the commune what he wants to do. Tasks

are assigned. You do what you're told. Such collectivist assumptions are no more demonstrable than those more individualistic values you cherish; and both sets of values are, in fact, religious positions though both you and Mao, or his ghost, will object to the label.

- How did Chinese Communism get into this conversation? We're discussing religion, not politics.

Maoism meets Cox's definition. It supports in China a cluster of ideas and institutions which consecrate a particular set of actions as necessary and redemptive.

- Mao closed China's temples. He removed Confucius' writings from the schools. Communism is anti-religious.

True, but at the same time it's a religion. All across China and the Soviet Union portraits of "saints" hang high in vast ceremonial halls, and people by the millions make pilgrimages to the mausoleums which contain the bodies of their patriarchs. In both countries a consecrated scripture is interpreted officially, and anyone who questions the received dogma is condemned as a heretic. Books are censored. All schools are parochial. The formation of a person's faith is carefully supervised by a zealous clergy of party faithful. There is even a messianic promise: the great day when the contradictions of history will be resolved and an age of classless joy will envelop the earth. Marx and Mao prided themselves that their philosophy was uncompromisingly materialistic and damned religion as an opiate by which the privileged keep the masses tranquil and passive, but their disciples have established a state-church which, formally at least, seems like a mirror image of the medieval church-states of Europe.

- I've always thought of religion as something to be encouraged, as by definition good, useful in shaping character and moral sensitivity. If I accept your claim that Communism is a religion, then I have to accept the idea that some religions are dangerous.

We're predisposed to think well of religions because most of us grew up in a country where the power of religion was constitutionally circumscribed and so we associate religion with the beauty of a sanctuary; the hush of a congregation and noble thoughts rather than with clerics and commisars who tell us what we can't do. Unfortunately, every religion has a darker side and power can corrupt religion as it can every other human institution. A religion is simply the shared faith and practice of a particular group. Communism is a religion because tens of millions swear that its ideas give a sense of purpose and hope to their lives, not because its informing ideas are necessarily life enhancing.

- By your definition Naziism would qualify as a religion.

Naziism displayed most of the features we associate with apocalyptic religion: strong faith in a charismatic leader; total commitment to a set of values which are held to be of ultimate importance; the conviction that there is only one truth and that all error must be suppressed; grand public pageants at holy shrines like Nuremberg; a bible, Mein Kampf; a messianic vision of a redeemed world purified by Aryan leaders. In its heyday Naziism presented a collection of myths, rites, customs, ideas, and institutions which pulled together and certified the aspirations of much of the German nation.

- If Naziism fits your definition, I'm more convinced than ever that the world would be better off without religion.

Perhaps, but religion is a natural element of our lives, not an option we can exercise or not. Religions exist everywhere and affect everyone, even those like some of you who are unconscious of these facts. No one and no group is religion-less because to be human is to be a confused creature, conscious of life's vagaries, a person who can't survive without a sense of purpose or a set of affirmations which promise to guide us through the confusing experiences

which are the stuff of our lives.

- The Nazis were storm troopers, brutes. They didn't exhibit what I'd call a religious personality.

Define what you mean by a religious person.

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

The Nazis were true believers.

- Someone who is affiliated with a congregation.

The Nazi Party was their congregation. You signed up. There were membership dues. There were regular meetings at which hymns were sung, a collection taken up, and loyalty pledged.

- If Satanic ideas like those of the Nazis are religious, why do so many people encourage us to be religious?

Out of naivete. Most of us limit our thirking to the well-known faiths of the West. Then, too, most Americans have not had any first-hand experience with the psychopathology of religion. We've never had a religious war in our country. Ignorant of history and associating religion with our parents and a few holidays, we innocently identify religion with motherhood, family, and pacifism rather than with the all white churches of the south, the Scopes Trial, Father Coughlin and the cross burnings of the Klan.

- You may be right, but I don't like thinking so. If you're right and everyone of us is caught up in the web of our community's religion, how do we ever gain perspective on our religion or on the values it consecrates? How do we ever free ours of our conditioning so we can make the necessary critical judgements?

God gave us each a mind as well as a heart and, fortunately, they operate somewhat independently. You can fall desperately in love and yet know that your beloved is not right for you. The trick is never to turn off your mind, but no one can be completely open-minded.

- You're saying we're trapped because no one can be a believer and a skeptic at the same time. If you believe you don't reserve judgment. If you have doubts you're not a believer.

It's not quite that black and white. Some believers are more intense, even fanatic; others are more reserved in their feelings. The higher one turns to his religious enthusiasm, the less likely will that person be able to hear and appreciate other voices. But even at the lower frequencies, the problem is there.

- There's a way out. I'm an agnostic.

All that says is that you're not sure about God. It doesn't say that your soul hasn't been shaped by religious traditions. Everyone's is.

-I don't believe that. Of course, Judaism deeply affects what you do, you're a rabbi. I go my own way.

I hate to disillusion you, but you don't.

- I don't belong to any synagogue.

You do belong to the American civil religion.

- To what?

The American civil religion.

- I've never heard of it. I'm sure there's no such church in my town.

Not all religions organize themselves into congregations, but I assure you, there is an American civil religion.

- Be more specific.

America's civil religion consists of the cluster of ideas and hopes which are affirmed and celebrated by our nation's institutions and calendar, consecrated in its Torah, the Constitution, and broadly shared by the citizenry. It is those ideas and hopes, and the ceremonies which confirm them, which constitute our civil religion.

- You're talking about culture, not religion.

Religion is an inseparable part of a community's culture, so much so that when under the pressure of the kind of revolutionary changes we've faced in modern times, active membershhip in the well-known religions is reduced. Other segments of the culture take over the religious role. For many in the United States, the institutions of the nation-state now provide the religious confirmation they require.

- What does this supposed religion teach?

Some have described America's civil religion as a secular humanism which affirms social justice: the autonomous individual, the Bill of Rights, public welfare, the work ethic, and human brotherhood. That's the touched-up picture. I'm afraid the civil religion, like all religions, has a darker side: intense individualism, happiness through having, and a tendency towards extravagant chauvinism. Its Shema is President Kennedy's famous motto: "Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country. . ." Its holidays are the Fourth of July, the second Tuesday in November, and Thanksgiving Day. Its symbols are the flag and the ballot and its liturgy includes the Star Spangled Banner and the Pledge of Allegiance. Its messianic vision suggests a humane republic, secure in peace and established in justice. America's civil religion provides all the necessary elements of a religious faith: a sense of common purpose, a social and personal ethic, affirming rituals, and a promise of the future, and is so used by millions.

- Isn't your civil religion just a convenient label, designed by people like yourself who are determined to see religion where it doesn't exist?

- Why wasn't the civil religion recognized ealier?

The social sciences have only recently developed the methodologies which allow us to study all aspects of the phenomenon which is properly labeled 'religion.'

- If you're right and there is a civil religion, many of my friends are charter members. They dislike institutional religion, believe in human decency, the public school system, affirmative action, arms control, a nuclear freeze, and world government. They're believers, but they'd argue that their ideas are purely rational and personal. You'd say that they don't realize that they're under the spell of America's civil religion and you may be right; when I argue with them about their ideas, they can get quite hot under the collar.

The more hotly an idea is defended the more certain you can be that it's part of that person's religious system. I sometimes describe religion as that cluster of ideas and hopes which we couldn't give up without cutting out our soul.

- I still think you're stretching a point. Religion's got nothing to do with trade policies or the Federal budget. I think of religion as lifting up mankind's hopes and ideals and not dealing with the nuts and bolts of administering the everyday world.

Have you ever looked at the Talmud? It's a massive law library which deals with all the issues, including the practical ones, which face any community. The Talmud sets out halacha, Jewish law, for such areas as contracts and torts as well as for religious observance and personal status.

Our hopes and values must be translated in effective policies or else they really are daydreams and religion is the sham some critics claim it to be. Since our ideas about life and purpose affect all we do and religion exists to help us live effectively, there can be no arbitrary boundaries between so-called religious and secular spheres.

- In our country the separation of church and state is a constitutional requirement.

-My father gets apoplectic when the rabbi talks politics. He keeps saying: 'what does he know, he's never had to make a profit.' Needless to say, they

don't agree on much. The founding fathers had had their fill of the joined power of the Cross and the Crown and the separation doctrine was established to preclude the establishment of a state-church. On an institutional level the separation doctrine operates effectively to keep our society free of the dangers which arise when the state and the church reinforce each other's privileges; but in real life none of us actually restricts our religious commitments to the worship hour. It can't be done. Inevitably, my religious ideas color how I vote, my attitude toward public welfare, even how I feel this country should conduct its foreign policy. And when a religious community agrees on some commitment, it's only natural that they should lobby and work for their beliefs. Look at the Quakers' role in the peace movement.

- And the interest of Jews in Israel.

- And of the Catholic Church in Latin America.

Fortunately, there are limits. A church has to abide by the ballot, the constitution, and the democratic process, otherwise there would be no way to restrain the more passionate. The separation doctrine is the cornerstone of our freedom, precisely because piety and politics can never be separated.

I want to get back to the question of a civil religion. Are you saying that everyone who doesn't belong to a church or synagogue belongs to the civil religion? I can't imagine American Nazis or the KKK signing on.

America's civil religion is a major presence. There are also smaller religious groupings and cults all over the religious landscape. The American Nazis and the Klan are really small cults who march under their own banner.

- If you're right about the civil religion, I'm a religious bigamist. In some areas, my feelings about Israel for one, I react as a Jew; in others, my feelings about the democratic process, I react as a civil religionist. Up till now I thought it was one religion to a customer.

Not necessarily. In Japan you'll often see a Buddhist shrine fronted by a Shinto gate and in China you'll often find Taoist and Buddhist images

in the sane shrine complex. That's not been the way in the West where religions have generally demanded unconditional loyalty, but in recent years there's been a new openness between the faiths, signaled by the term ecumenicism; and in an open society like ours, with its public schools and natiional holidays, it's inevitable that all of us should be deeply affected by the nation's civil attitudes.

- I can't imagine an orthodox rabbi or a Roman Catholic priest accepting your thesis.

- Groups like the Amish have deliberately kept themselves apart.

The various communities exhibit different degrees of openness, but none are unaffected. Look at the demands by various groups of Roman Catholic nuns not to be treated as second-class citizens by the Church.

- I suspect your local bishop would argue that his church has always accommodated its forms to the needs of the times, but that its basic teachings remain fixed and unchanging. An orthodox rabbi makes the same case about Judaism. They'd argue that forms may have changed, different melodies are used at services, but that the teachings of their religion remain as inviolate as they were.

They'd be wrong. History does not substantiate their claim despite its popularity. People want to look on their religion as the guardian of an unchanging truth. They want and need that confirmation, but, in fact, religions are dynamic entities which react to their environment and charge with the times.

Over the centuries Judaism and Christianity have repeatedly undergone transformations which were substantive and substantial, and not purely cosmetic. For a long time both traditions insisted that God is the only agent of social change.

That which has been is that which will be until the Messiah came. Today there is the social gospel and teachers of both religions advocate civil activism

and prophetic commitment. Until recently the message was endure patiently the trials of this life in order to gain life eternal. Now we say: be a partner with God in the work of creation.

- As a rabbi does it bother you that we're like magpies that built their nest with whatever we can find that seems to fit the bill? I'd think you'd want us to be Jewish to the core.

I never lose sleep over what is impossible. It's inevitable that Jews and everyone else pick up attitudes from our environment. Fortunately, America's civil religion was created by people whose attitudes had been nurtured by Biblical ideas, and over the years Americans have found many Biblical elements extremely congenial. The Liberty Bell is inscribed: "Proclaim liberty throughout the land." The Federalist Papers cite God's rebuke of the Israelites when they cried out for a king as another proof of the legitimacy of constitutional democracy. Our Constitution enshrines Israel's protean vision of humanity, "Have we not all one Father; has not one God created us all?" and the concept of freedom under law. In many areas of my life I can't tell where the Jewish part of me leaves off and the American part takes over.

On the whole, what you called our religious bigamy has been a good thing for us and the country. It's helped us remain a relatively tolerant people. In 1980 when the president of the Southern Baptist Convention announced that God did not hear the prayers of Jews, his proprietary attitude toward God grated against the broader assumptions of the civil religion and he was widely criticized. I'm sure that if he had spoken as he did to a Christian community which had not yet been deeply influenced by a civil religion which encourages respect for those of other opinions - all that Martin Luther King suggested when he said: "We must learn to live together as brothers or we shall perish together as fools" - most would have found his words unexceptional. After all, classic Christianity built itself around Jesus's claim: "No one shall come to the Father except through Me."

- Let's go back to our original question. I know I'm an American and I know how this country's laws and customs affect me. I live American. I think American. I know I'm a Jew, but I don't know how the Jewish way affects me. A few candles and an occasional holiday meal hardly add up to anything significant. I don't consciously think Jewish or consciously make my decisions by Jewish standards.

We often think Jewish without knowing it. Everyone here has been or is in college. It's Jewish to think college is a must.

- It's a must for everyone.

Not so. There are ethnic groups who discourage college enrollment out of the conviction that education beyond a certain level will alienate their children from their way of life. The Menonites take their children out of school after the eighth grade. With us it was off the boat and into City College.

- My grandparents never went to college.

Europe's colleges only rarely enrolled Jews, but every Jewish boy went to heder and the importance of education was emphasized in every conceivable way. It was an honor to be able to marry your daughter to the brightest student in the local yeshivah. It was perfectly legitimate for a man to spend his life as a natmid, a perpetual student. One of the hardest counseling tasks a rabbi can have is to convince parents that their teen-ager is not college material and ought to be encouraged to learn a trade.

- You're talking about a cultural trait.

One which grows out of the religious tradition. Since the second century Jews have been taught that they are required to educate their sons. Talmud Torah, Torah study, was a virtue which could not be too highly praised. I'll give you another example: intellectual independence, stiff-neckedness. We're not a submissive lot. We've never been a people who meekly accepted authority.

Abraham argued with God about Sodon and Gomorrah and Job had a few things to say to God about His fairness doctrine. Jewish practice encouraged these feelings. We've never kissed the ring of ecclesiastical superiors. We don't automatically defer to statutory authority. I'm not surprised that the Jewish students in my seminars love to argue or that Israel's Kenesset is better known for tumult and noisy arguments than for decorum. We've always been a noisy, cantankerous lot.

- Noisiness has nothing to do with religion.

It's a by-product of a particular religious outlook.

- I'm still troubled by the broad definition you give to religion. I haven't got it here but I'm sure my dictionary defines religion as faith in God or gods.

I once traced the changes in the way dictionaries defined religion and they're quite revealing. The first dictionaries reflected the parochial horizons of their times, medieval Christendom, and defined religion as faith in the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost. Later, after the age of exploration when Europe belatedly recognized that the rest of the world existed and was civilized, dictionary definitions were enlarged to include Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, and the Chinese traditions. Since these religions all had shrines, scriptures and sacred symbols, religions were also described as institutions which possessed these features. More recently, dictionary editors have begun to reflect the approach I've been taking which focuses on the function of religion rather than its forms. You'll find religion defined today as "a way of life in accord with authorized teachings" or "faith that the truth is known and the institutions which support that faith."

- The belief in God definition remains the first one.

Not always, and you must remember that dictionaries list common usage as well as correct usage. I'll make my point again. The modern study of religion began when scholars recognized that rituals, and even catechisms, are secondary manifestations and shifted their interest from form to function. The heart of any religious enterprise lies in the redemptive ideas and promises which it expresses and the function of a religion is to provide such ideas and encourage their acceptance. Like it or not, idol worship and Marxist ideology are religious phenomena, and unless the Moral Majority manages to censor Mr. Webster the next generation of dictionaries will reflect this understanding even more strongly.

- I'm still here and I'm still an atheist and a non-member.

You're here, a Jew among Jews.

- That's not what I meant.

But it's part of what I mean. Judaism is a religious civilization, not simply a set of doctrines or practices, and being Jewish isn't limited to those who can say 'Amen' wholeheartedly after every paragraph in the prayer book. Many Jews, like many Christians, have their own ideas about their traditions and institutions. We've had ample proof of that this morning.

- I kept thinking of Israel as you were making your argument. It's a Jewish state, but I was there over the High Holidays and my hosts never even asked if I'd like to go to services; and when I said I like to go, they made it clear that they weren't interested in joining me.

In Israel there is an orthodox establishment, a growing number of non-traditional synagogues and groups, and yes, an Israeli civil religion which, like its American counterpart, is expressed through the institutions and laws of the state and shapes and confirms the values and hopes of many.

- My hosts called themselves lo-dati, non-religious.

Lo-dati is as much a political tag as a statement of religious disinterest. If I lived in Israel I'd be a lo-dati. The lo-dati are opposed to current administrative arrangements which give the orthodox rabbinate absolute control over the laws of personal status.

At this point a loudspeaker crackled with the announcement of a volley ball game. I got in a last word, a favorite line from George Santayana's Reason In Religion: "Every living and healthy religion has a marked idiosyncracy. Its power consists in its speciaand surprising message and in the bias which that revelation gives to life."

- I can't see where Judaism's and Christianity's messages are significantly different. Inside and out, my Christian friends and I are pretty much the same.

I remember your friends, the Jacksons. Go play ball. We'll come back to this point. We've got plenty of time. I was invited to referee their game. We were off to a good start.

Chapter 2

MY FAITH - OUR RELIGION

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

- I'm not going to give in to your arguments. Religion is a private matter. I make up my own mind. No one tells me what to believe.

They already have. No one starts a religious search with an empty mind. By the time we begin to think about religion we've been imprinted by our environment with its most cherished ideas and values. Your views have been shaped by the mass media, suburbia, what we've read, the conventional wisdom, our friends and our home.

- I've friends who never went to religious school and who were raised in homes which didn't even celebrate Seder. Their parents told them they didn't want to impose their beliefs. They wanted their children to be able, when they grew up, to make up their minds. They were raised without any religious imprint.

Your friends may have grown up without a Jewish imprint, but their minds were still religiously shaped. Their parents couldn't have kept them away from the influences of the civil religion. I'm sure they celebrated Thanksgiving and Labor Day, took civics in Junior High School, and recited the Pledge of Allegiance. There's simply no way to escape some religious conditioning.

- Still, I respect parents who try not to manipulate their children.

Manipulation is a loaded word. I'd never force a child to agree with me; but I believe that parents shouldn't hide their ideas from their children and should encourage their children to share their religious lives. I never considered my children's Hebrew lessons as a form of brainwashing. They were learning a useful skill, the language of Jewish life, and, at the same time, learning something about me and the values and interests which are important

to me. It couldn't hurt them. It could bring us closer. A child needs direction and standards to measure himself against. Just as a knife is sharpened by filing it against a hard stone, so convictions are strengthened when we test them against strong parental and societal beliefs. It's not an act of kindness always to tell a child, 'I can't tell you what to do.'

- I'm here today because my parents kept everything Jewish from me. They kept telling me how important it was for me to be free to make up my own mind. They meant well, but I'm not sure they did me a favor. I desperately wanted roots. I needed to know who I was. Everybody else had something or was something. I didn't know where or how to begin thinking about myself.

A 'keep Judaism away from Johnny' policy guarantees ignorance, not independence of judgment, but people like your parents tend to be so committed to the idea of an open mind that they cannot admit, however often it is demonstrated to them, that no one escapes religious conditioning, and that a home environment characterized by conviction and standards more often than not encourages rather than stifles strong independent beliefs.

- My husband and I faced this question a few years ago when our oldest was about to enter school. We decided at the same time to enroll her in Religious School, and what tipped the scale was our feeling that we didn't want her to grow like weeds, unattended and unrefined. I see too many weed children today and they seem to lack a real sense of their worth, their potential.

Emerson once described a weed as a flower whose virtue has not yet been discovered, and I often think of weed children as the ones who are denied a chance to discover how beautiful a carefully shaped life can be. I guess what I'm saying is that we felt that it would be much better to have her spend Saturday morning in Sabbath School than watching cartoon carnivals.

- Sabbath School wasn't much. I certainly didn't learn much there, if anything, of real value. We made clay candlesticks and learned to read the aleph-bet. Sunday School was a nothing; nothing that happened there was in any way significant.

- The best course I took before going to college was my Confirmation class. The rabbi made us think.

- I used to come home each week and tell my parents it's all a waste, we go over the same holiday prayers and sing the same songs every year.

You probably also complained about what little homework your teachers assigned. Religious schools struggle with an almost impossible task. They are given two or three hours a week to explain the forms of Jewish life, to teach the facts of our people's history, to discuss the tradition's ethical concerns, and to enable the student to master enough Hebrew to be able to manage our worship, and they are expected to accomplish this without making any serious intellectual demands on the students. 'Johnny already has too much homework,' we're supposed to teach without making any demands, 'if you give exams you'll turn Johnny off.'

- The problem's not homework or even the short sessions but the fact that there's really little benefit to be gained from religious school. If the schools had all the time they claim they need, the kids would know more Hebrew words and more Jewish history, but I doubt that they would necessarily be able to live better lives.

More time couldn't hurt. An informed Jew will be a happier Jew than an ignorant one. The more we know about Judaism, the more it can mean to us.

- Religion begins in the soul, not the mind.

If our religion remains vague and diffuse, it can't and won't make much of a difference in our lives.

- I still say you can't be taught to be a Jew. You can learn all the facts, but until you decide to accept our way of life such learning remains academic.

I agree. That's why the home environment is so important in a child's religious development. Sabbath schools were organized to provide the child useful information about the way of life he saw in his home.

- My school was big on doing: we visited hospitals and sang for the patients, corresponded with Israeli pen pals, wrote letters to Soviet Jews, and wrote and conducted our own services. Every other year the youth group took a trip to Israel.

Today's schools have a new job to do because so many students come from a denuded Jewish home. The first statement any of you made was: 'My home was exactly like the Jackson's.' By providing opportunities to engage in Jewish experiences our schools try to make up for the blandness of many homes.

- I hear you, but it still seems wrong. You're trying to shape people in an area where I believe they ought to be let alone. Religion is, or should be, a purely private matter.

Faith is private. Religion always involves community. A religion draws together and celebrates a group's values and vision. My faith represents my private understanding of Judaism. No one's faith is a carbon copy of his religion's creed. We take what we need out of the religious ideas that are part of our environment and we put these ideas together in a very personal way.

- I don't want to be a magpie. I don't want to build a nest out of leavings. I want to be an eagle. I want to soar free, be on my own.

were being unreasonable when they demanded that the survivors of the Holocaust be let in. The British Fleet needed Arab oil and, therefore, England needed Arab support. As we talked I realized that for me this wasn't just another political discussion. The issue didn't have two sides to it. I became quite determined and was reproved for incivility.

- I wouldn't call that a religious experience.

It certainly revealed the intensity of my involvement. Seder fell a few weeks after our argument and that night the familiar words, "next year in Jerusalem," caught in my throat; and when I graduated I went to work for the Jewish Agency securing materials the yishuv needed to defend itself against invading Arab armies.

- I still don't see how you can call any part of this episode a religious experience.

Call it then an episode which made me aware of the death of certain feelings. The following day, May fifteenth, the day Israel proclaimed her independence, I happened to be in Times Square, and as that news flashed on the electronic tape high overhead my eyes clouded up, powerful feelings swept over me, and the words a lonely Jacob spoke when he unexpectedly sensed God's protective presence came to mind: "Surely God is in this place and I knew it not." New feelings had come into play and I knew that I would probably never again be without them.

- It's like falling in love.

In everyone's life there are times when something within us reaches out to something apprehended but not yet comprehended, and we acknowledge commitments that we have not till then consciously recognized. These are the times when we become conscious of our faith commitments.

- My father was in Patton's Tank Corps during the second World War. He dates his active involvement - he's president of our synagogue - to the day his company liberated a German concentration camp.

Before an eagle can fly he spends weeks as a fledgling being cared for in the eyrie. For us Judaism was a safe and secure nest in which we were nurtured until our imagination and learning had developed to the point where we could fly on our own.

- I've had a checkered religious career: T.M., an Indian guru, Zen, even a brief stay on a religious commune. My parents maintained a Jewish home, but whatever I learned there had little to do with my search. Every step of the way it was always my decision. I decided when to join and when to leave. If you're saying that we only think we're making religious decisions, that we're indelibly programmed in childhood, you're wrong. I could and did walk away. I made some totally unJewish decisions.

I'm not a determinist. People do convert, but I hold to my argument that the home imprint is deeply etched. Voltaire spent his life attacking the Church and mocking Church doctrine; yet, just before he died he asked to be reconciled with the Church of his parents. The main point I've been trying to make is that a good bit of conditioning always precedes conscious commitment and forever after affects our commitments.

- I've always assumed that religious commitment grew out of a special experience of God: Moses at the Burning Bush, Isaiah suddenly seized by the word of God. You're saying that being religious is simply a matter of being alive and part of community.

- Some of us are more emotionally intense than others. Some have what William James called a conversion experience. Most of us grow into our faith without any real trauma.

- How was it with you?

I was in college towards the end of the second World War. My tutor was an Anglophile who felt that the English government had good reason to prevent Jews fleeing Nazi Europe from entering Palestine. The Zionists, he felt,

- Thcse were intense years. I might have reacted the same way. I can imagine hcw he felt, but I was born in the early nineteenfifties and I grew up in the undramatic world of suburban America. Binding experiences don't take place in cocoons.

- So leave the cocoon. I got hooked at The Wall. I got there late one afternoon when there was just enough sun left to bring out the golden glow in the stcnes. A few old Jews were praying. As I watched tears came to my eyes and I felt the presence of Jewish history and that I had a part in it.

I've never been to Jerusalem, but I was chosen to read the names of a group of Jewish refuseniks who had been imprisoned by the Soviet at our Confirmation service ard as I read I choked up. I felt something.

- If it's all a question of having a religious high, why are we talking about idertity? Why have religious schools? No one car organize for us such an experience. You can't say to me, tomorrow at seven you'll feel your loyalties.

We have to be prepared for these experiences. Many non-Jews saw the corpses ard ovens and were sickened by them. They certainly must have felt deeply about the evil of Naziism and man's cruelty; but they wouldn't have felt the tug of Jewish loyalty. Only a Jew could feel that. Our conditioning sets the parameters of our reactions to life's experiences, and for Jews the conditioning recipe is well-known: light Chanukah lights and Sabbath candles, sing Hatikvah and Jerusalem the Golden, attend worship, browse around in our literature, work in the Jewish community. Don't sit in services daring the music and words to get through to you; involve yourself in the moment, open yourself up.

- I went a few times. Nothing happened.

Try again. Religious feeling is like love. Sometimes love surprises us and sometimes it takes a lot of being together before we realize that we're

more than friends. Falling in love at first sight is rare. More often, I suspect, we simply find that the familiar has grown on us and become part of us. If you want to feel easy as a Jew give the Jewish way a chance to get to you.

- I know what you mean. I told you dad was active in our Temple. When I was a kid services bored me, but I went because he wanted me to; and one day, to my surprise, I began to sing along and it was a nice feeling.

- You know, this is the first time I've ever heard Jews talk about their personal religious feelings. In graduate school I had a roommate who never stopped talking about the time he accepted Christ and about the changes this had brought in his life. Christians seem to do a lot of talking about their beliefs. Jews don't, at least not the Jews I know.

We're conditioned differently. Christianity has always placed more emphasis on the transforming power of faith than we have. They believe that accepting the Christian faith is in and of itself redemptive and they prove this by having people witness publically to the strength that faith brought to their lives. Judaism, obviously, values faith, but we have never assumed that faith alone can transform a life.

- Go on.

Jews built their religious life around a specific set of commandments which had been given them by God. These Instructions set out the right way. By following the Commandments Jews developed good habits and developed moral sensitivity. The Jewish way was a demanding one and among the early Christians there were those like Paul who felt that the commandments asked too much of them. Paul taught that faith is the keystone. If you have faith you don't need the support of a structure of laws. Presumedly, one's life can be suddenly transformed. Faith is seen as a ceaseless miracle which allows the believer to be like the cripple at Lourdes who suddenly throws away his crutches. Church life was shaped to encourage worshippers to believe in the miraculous

powers of faith.

- What do we say about faith?

That faith sometimes works miracles, but that faith alone cannot guarantee that our lives will be shaped and disciplined as they should be. An alcoholic feels immensely relieved when he admits publically that he's ill, but once he's detoxified he has to discipline himself never to take another drink. Judaism never lets us forget the importance of habit and discipline. We emphasize the supportive community and the structured way of life as well as the significance of faith.

- You've been making a big thing about the fact that faith begins in the heart, not the head. If you're right, then Judaism moved the boat by not asking people, as many Christian groups do, to make a public witness. There are few experiences more compelling than honest words spoken from the heart.

Jews have tended to distrust experience cut loose from its moorings in a defining tradition. We give leadership to the learned, not to the possessed, because we know that faith is an undifferentiated emotion until it's shaped by wisdom. For us it's a matter of balance: schooling, the accumulated wisdom of all, as well as experience, the testimony of one. The danger of focusing worship on private testimony is that we'll focus on the so-called miracles, neglect the slow, undramatic but absolutely essential, work of building a wholesome society.

- I have a feeling we took our mistrust of witnessing too far. In Religious School we talked about everything but religious feeling. Our services are cold.

- I like the Quaker service where each person says whatever is on his mind or nothing at all. It's a genuine moment. My rabbi gives me a book and says that he'll explain what I don't understand. I often feel I'm in a classroom, not a service.

Intensity by itself is not a virtue. Because faith described an undifferentiated feeling, because there are all kinds of faith, a religious high can be a dangerous moment. Millions were caught up in the Nuremberg Rallies and in the Red Guard's Permanent Revolution. I've attended an evangelical service full of clapping and singing, full of faith based on crude patriotism and cruder racism. The moment was special; emotions flowed; the participants felt confirmed and consecrated; but the loyalties the moment evoked were dangerous and dysfunctional. Faith begins in the heart, but like all human emotions must never be left to the heart alone. Judaism does not praise blind faith and is not satisfied with an innocent faith. The person of faith need not - must not - turn off his mind.

- I still like the unstructured service. I'm a person, not a parrot. Happenings are genuine.

The value of a happening depends entirely on the quality of those involved. Our service was shaped around carefully chosen texts and the Torah. We're guaranteed ideas worth thinking about.

- But the texts are someone else's.

The texts are meant as springboards to reflection and there's music, song and silence to give you plenty of time to develop your own thoughts. The point is that the readings present you ideas worth thinking about. They present to you the basic dimensions of the Jewish outlook.

- Our rabbi constantly interrupts to give us background on a particular paragraph. Sometimes I'm interested, but generally I find he gets in the way.

That's too bad. A service should flow and be full of what the Bible calls "the beauty of holiness." When somebody's always giving directions, the sacred has trouble getting through.

- Getting through?

A German scholar, Rudolph Otto, coined the term numinous to describe the emotional impact of the moment when we become aware of the mysterious reality beyond the work-a-day world and are touched by a reality beyond any we know from ordinary experience. We know the numinous as Kedusha, holiness. Otto, a non-Jew, found the numinous present on a number of religious occasions, including a Yom Kippur service in a small North African synagogue. He described the scene. The worshippers were in white. The chant was minor-keyed and repetitive. The congregation moved with an hypnotic sway which drew the worshippers out of themselves and clearly took them into a world beyond ordinary cares and concerns.

- It sounds attractive, but at home there is a good bit of moving about and gossip. I wouldn't say our service gives off an aura of holiness.

- We don't chit-chat so much, but we sit there and nothing much happens. I will say that the youth group does have a lively service.

This generation has loosened up a good bit, but being loose and dancing in the aisles is not a formula for Kedusha. I've sensed holiness in a Thai Temple where Buddhist monks sat immobile and meditated in complete silence. Our Yom Kippur service has a solemn and compelling beauty to it. The mood of the worshippers rather than the particular form of worship establishes the holiness of a particular religious experience.

Spontaneity must be a major ingredient of the religious experience which has a punch to it. Unfortunately, in all the services I've been to I was cast as a spectator, not a participant. Someone was always announcing a new page. I'm told the Hasidim had a compelling service. We don't.

Spontaneity is your ingredient, not mine. Spontaneity is the free play of feeling and thought. Worship involves feeling and thought playing on the themes of a carefully crafted service. Spontaneity is an unfocused, light-hearted feeling. A worship service focuses our attention on the religion's basic themes. A worship service presents the sacred possibilities of life as they are defined and affirmed by that particular wisdom. Intensity and concentration are the key elements of Kedusha, not spontaneity.

- You're promoting an exercise worship which is to me little more than a well-designed indoctrination technique. What you call holiness is simply the emotional electricity which is released when a service is effectively presented. Rabbis and other religious folk prefer book worship to spontaneity because they know that if people repeat the creed often enough they'll end up as believers.

- Of course. Worship permits a community to come together so that it can remind itself of the special message of its religious tradition, and relate that message to the details of its life. Worship keeps a community from unravelling and falling apart. Worship exists in every society not because of the designs of crafty priests but because it provided a necessary moment of recommitment.

- You keep talking of community as if it's the ultimate value. It's not. Community permits cooperation, but it also tends to stifle creativity and, unfortunately, religious communities are among the worst offenders. Parochial schools indoctrinate; pulpits preach; services put words in our mouths; and synods organize political campaigns to outlaw abortion or force television stations to show "acceptable" material.

As I said earlier, all institutions are rife with contradictions, but we can't do without most of them. Schools educate and indoctrinate. Hospitals heal and sometimes unwittingly shorten or unnecessarily prolong a life. Like all human institutions, the synagogue has a spotty record. One synagogue excommunicates Spinoza, another runs a Great Books course. The synagogue is not always a saintly, or even inspiring, place; yet, it's a necessary place.

A synagogue offers community instruction, an end to loneliness; a calendar of effective ceremonies and holidays which remind the Jew of the joys and duties of the religious life, the wisdom of the tradition and its moral challenge.

Without synagogues and the [illegible]social welfare institutions of a Jewish community, Judaism's message would float irrelevantly above us in the air.

- I don't expect any institution to be pristine, but let it at least be relevant. The people in my parents' congregation are always squabbling over nothing. Our city's full of real problems race, unemployment, poverty - and they hold endless meetings on whether to redecorate the Social Hall.

Religious bodies are human, not divine, institutions. Your synagogue is a community of neighbors who share a religious tradition, not a fellowship limited to the virtuous and the wise. The synagogue's goal is holiness, but life is with people and few, if any, of us are saints. Inevitably, synagogues reflect in their activities and programs the cultural level and interests of their members.

- Only that?

- Irrelevance doesn't bother me as much as hypocrisy. I'm put off by congregations which emblazon The Ten Commandments over their ark and each year honor hard-eyed men whose only virtue is their wealth or power.

You'll hear no argument from me. There's a lovely Yiddish proverb which says that it's common knowledge that every rich man is wise, competent, has a beautiful singing voice.

- I was raised to treat religion and religious leaders with respect. As a child I thought our rabbi locked like God. Now I find that some of his ideas seem trivial and that some of his talks lack information he ought to have.

Religious leaders are, first of all, human beings. Some are intelligent. Some are simply passionate. Some are truly humble. Some enjoy power and the trappings of office. Almost all try to serve God but none is Godlike. None should command automatic deference. Jews are never asked to kneel before their rabbi.

- I once went to a service where the bishop sat on a throne looking like Charlemagne. I feel strongly that royal trappings fit poorly on those who call themselves God's servants.

A seminary teacher I much admired put it well: your ability to do justice and love mercy will often depend on how well you learn tc walk humbly with God. In the pulpit I wear a business suit because I don"t want anyone to think of me as apart or different.

- I can't argue with you when you're in the pulpit.

Many do, later. I don't claim to preach an Infallible Word. I say what I think, why I think as I do, and why I believe my ideas express the thrust of our tradition. If I'm persuasive, well and good; if not, I'll be tuned out, even if I'm right.

- We have after service discussions and our rabbi gives everyone a chance to talk. He doesn't irterrupt. He's a sensitive man, but he also doesn't change his mind.

We're back to the problem of open-mindedness. Religious questions are not theoretical questicns asked calmly and answered dispassionately, but urgent

questions which must be answered convincingly if we are to live happily and sanely. Faith implies commitment. Our answers keep us going. Once we have answers that satisfy us, we don't readily let go of them. I wouldn't have become a rabbi if I weren't convinced of the importance of our special message.

- Let's get back to the synagogue rather than those who serve in it. At home we've had a succession of rabbis, and even the good ones haven't been able to shift most people's interest from bazaars and bingo to worship or serious learning or social action.

Your synagogue also uses the prayer book, offers classes in Bible and Hebrew, and raises money for Operation Renewal. No synagogue can eliminate regular services or take Amos out of the Bible. It's trapped by the Jewish tradition.

- Friday night there are a lot of empty seats.

And a minyan.

- The message isn't getting through.

How can you be sure? Each of our lives has its special schedule and services are there and the rabbi is there whenever our time of need comes.

- I think of the synagogue as a place of spectacle rather than search, a set-apart place, a sanctuary.

The Temple in Jerusalem was a sanctuary. It was built around a Holy of Holies which only the High Priest could enter. Only a priest of the family of Aaron could officiate at the altar. The synagogue, on the other hand, is an open place, a people's place, where holiday and Sabbath prayers are sung, the Torah read and discussed, and community business debated. Anyone who is competent can lead the service. The synagogue reflects Judaism's teaching that every man, every place, and every useful activity is precious to God.

It doesn't have to be built a certain way. It's a place where every individual

counts. Nine rabbis do not make a minyan. Ten laborers do. The Temple was an aristocratic institution. The synagogue is a democratic place. Anyone who is able can conduct the service or read from the Torah.

- If Judaism in fact teaches that every man, every place, and every useful activity is precious to God, how was it that we made such a fuss over the Jerusalem Temple where everything was controlled by an hereditary priesthood and where there were all kinds of barriers and 'Do Not Enter' signs?

At first Jews copied for their place of worship the shrines which were everywhere in the world about them. Solomon's Temple was a typical West Asian palace shrine. Institutions never emerge full-blown. It took time before people realized that only a different kind of institution was needed to express their revolutionary religious ideas.

- That makes sense, but then why do we pray for The Temple to be rebuilt? Personally, I hope it never happens. I've watched animals being sacrificed in the Indian villages of Latin America and there was nothing elevating in such rites. Besides, I don't want my religion done for me by priests.

I take the prayer which asks for a renewal of worship in the Jerusalem Temple as nothing more than a dramatic expression of the age-old Jewish hope that we want to be a free people in our own land and be able to worship there as we see fit.

- That's not what it says.

This prayer was written shortly after 70 C.E. when the Temple was destroyed by the Romans. Some Jews looked on the destruction of the Temple as the beginning of exile; it was only natural that they should associate its rebuilding with the end of exile. The important historical fact is that they didn't spend too much time lamenting what they no longer had but quickly reorganized religious life around the synagogue. The leaders of the day recognized the value of the informal congregations which had developed naturally wherever Jews lived,

and once The Temple was destroyed attached the aura of holiness to these informal centers by ruling that a number of rituals such as the blowing of the Shofar and the handling of the lulav and ethrog, once reserved to Jerusalem, could now be observed in them.

- When you talk about attaching an aura of holiness to an institution, I hear intonations of magic.

Not magic but meaning. For worship in the synagogue to work people must find there that emotional electricity which turns a perfunctory occasion into an exciting and reassuring rite. The synagogue had been totally informal. It was essential that it be endowed with some of the Temple's holiness.

- I've always thought of the synagogue as a community center which has classrooms and larger meeting rooms where services can be held. In our place we hold assemblies and public lectures and weddings in the same auditorium we hold services. The Ark can be rolled off.

The rabbis called the synagogue a mikdash me'at, a small sanctuary. They envisaged an open institution, but not a totally informal one. The Ark which contained the Torah scrolls was curtained off the way the Holy of Holies in The Temple had been. Worshippers bowed when they crossed in front of the Ark. When the Torah was paraded worshippers touched it with their prayer shawls and then kissed the garment. Synagogue worship comes at set times and has a set form.

The camp cook chose this moment to bring in a tea cart. When everyone had been served the conversation resumed on a slightly different tack.

- I've been debating whether or not to join a congregation. I want to set down some roots. I like the holidays. I care about Israel. I'm proud of being Jewish, but I don't agree with some of the doctrines the synagogue stands for.

For instance.

- I don't believe God answers prayer or that there's life after death. I certainly don't believe that God actually gave the Torah to Moses on Mt. Sinai or even that he spoke to Moses or to any prophet any place else.

No synagogue I know requires potential members to sign articles of faith before they are allowed to join. Even when I was ordained I wasn't required to affirm a creed or agree to submit to a superior's authority.

- I'm surprised. I knew that rabbis didn't prostrate themselves before some chief rabbi like newly ordained priests before a bishop, but I always thought there must be some kind of loyalty oath.

Our teacher told us simply: 'We've taught you what we can. Continue studying. Try to live up to the Torah's principles and teach them to your congregation as best you can.'

- Interesting, but you really haven't addressed my question. You wouldn't have spent years in the seminary if you didn't find Jewish ideas sympathetic. I don't. Judaism's over there and I'm here. How can I affirm what I don't accept?

You can't. You needn't.

- You can't be saying that Judaism is like silly putty that I can shape into anything I want to make of it.

A synagogue is a community of Jews bound together by respect for Torah, familiarity with the patterns of Jewish culture, and concern for the survival of the Jewish people. A synagogue is not a congregation of "true believers." We don't bar the door to anyone can't say Amen to every idea in the Torah or the prayer book.

- I can believe anything I want.

Who can stop you? But expect the synagogue to zealously promote its special message.

- That's coercion.

Not ccercion, consciousness-raising. If a religious body uses the power of the state to force attendance and submission, that's coercion; but when, as in the case of the American synagogue,attendance is voluntary and the only power the institution possesses is the power of suggestion and example, then we're talking not of coercion but cf gentle and legitimate encouragement.

- You're being inconsistent. On the one hand you're telling me that I can't expect my synagogue to tailor its teachings to my beliefs, but you've also told us that Judaism is an evclving tradition which has changed to fit the needs cf changing times.

Life is full of contradiction and consistency is not recessarily the mark of truth.

- That's no answer.

I want to deal with the issue you raise at length at another time, so now I'll simply say that Judaism evolves but does so slowly by a process of serious reflection and community consensus. Your views and needs are only one of the few of thousands to which the synagogue must be open and, to some degree, adjust.

Haven't you overstated the synagogue's openness? The synagogue may not demand that members take a loyalty oath, but meny rabbis tell their communities that they must follow the whole traditional set of rules.

- Not so long ago anyone who didn't conform was excommunicated.

During the Middle Ages each Jewish community was responsible for the maintenance of law and order among its members and one of the few effective means of control at its disposal was the threat of ostracism. Interestingly, the first text by a Jewish thinker who wrestled seriously with the implications of emancipation and modernity, Moses Mendelsohn's Jerusalem, advocated the banning of the ban. Ccercion, he said, had no place in a world where the religious bodies were no longer charged with maintaining law and order.

- The chief rabbis of Israel don't agree with Mendelsohn. They want everyone to obey the full religious law and they've used their political clout to gain authority in these areas.

Israel's a special case. The State defines itself as a Jewish State and for various political as well as historic reasons the orthodox rabbinate has been given the right to administer the laws which regulate personal status.

I disapprove heartily of that arrangement which violates my belief that the democracy requjires the separation of church and state: the problem is not that rabbinic regulations are necessarily unacceptable in general, rabbinic law is both functional and sensible but that the present arrangement is coercive and was imposed after a crude political bargain.

- Israel's rabbis wouldn't have demanded these powers in the first place if traditional Judaism didn't assume that this was the right way to organize Jewish life. I'm no expert, but it seems to me that Jewish political philosophy cannot whole-heartedly espouse democracy since the tradition assumes that certain rules are God-given instructions and not subject to popular referendum.

Those who believe literally in Sinai must feel that no other law but God's law, the Torah, would be appropriate for a Jewish state.

- Khomeini's Iran is based on the same kind of logic.

So were all European states until the French Revolution. So are all Arab states today. The separation of church and state is a modern concept which requires an almost impossible revision of outlook for those who believe whole-heartedly that their religion's special message literally represents revelation. True believers know that God's rules cannot be set aside just because a majority decide that divorce should be allowed or abortions permitted.

After all, what right have human beings to override God's will?

- As a rabbi how can you answer the other side of that argument? If Judaism can be changed by the popular will how can it claim to be a sacred tradition?

By asking how anyone can be sure he knows what God wants. Revelation must always be interpreted and that's a human enterprise and so necessarily one into which error can intrude. I know orthodox rabbis who deplore the present political arrangement in Israel almost as much as I do. They believe, as I do, that in the modern world coercion ends up by being counterproductive and would be satisfied as long as their right to practice Judaism as they see fit is not compromised, to have the State enforce the halacha.

- You only get this problem because Judaism mixes religion into practical affairs where it doesn't belong.

I'll say it again. It can't be otherwise. Religion's not a romantic sentiment but a structured way of expression which supports and puts into practice that faith's special message. Put another way, we who serve God whom we affirm to be just and merciful must not only worship Him in the synagogue but work to create a just and merciful society. To this end the Torah not only promulgates righteousness in general terms - we are to speak the truth, avoid malicious gossip, not bear a grudge, be loyal to our family responsibilities, respect the sanctity of marriage, and honor our parents - but properly sets out a whole series of specific rules through which holiness, as the Israelites understood the term, would become part of the social order: tithing one's field, freeing the slave on the sabbatical year, paying a laborer immediately all that he has been promised, due process, and a carefully organized judicial system.

- You're talking about law, not religion.

Religion without law is like learning without a curriculum. It may be pleasurable but it will never add up to anything - be focused. Judaism is not a private piety of withdrawal but an affirmation of righteous living and the righteous community and necessarily is deeply concerned that ways be found to structure its values into people's public and private lives.

- That means getting involved in politics. I'm not sure I like the image of rabbis striking deals in a smokefilled room.

I wouldn't want my synagogue to align itself with the personal ambitions of any politician or political party, but when it comes to social policy and the questions which involve the future of life on this earth, I can't imagine Judaism remaining silent and as a rabbi I can't imagine myself remaining uninvolved.

- Play that idea out for a moment. You want to be in politics in order to sponsor Judaism's social concerns. If you become active in politics every other religious group has the right to do the same, and many will push for programs you don't approve of: creationism, the right-to-life campaign, and federal aid to parochial schools. Most of the single issue crusades of our day have begun with some religious body. Wouldn't it be better for all the groups to stay out of politics?

Everything we do creates possibilities and problems. Moreover, Judaism encourages us to be involved. Moses was given specific rules to govern the life of the tribes in their new home. Amos and Jeremiah had much to say about the economics and foreign policies of the ruling class.

- A recent poll indicated that most Americans would prefer it if their ministers stayed out of politics.

People call a sermon political when they disagree with the preacher. If they agree he's not talking politics but explaining God's word and doing good. The same people who today blast the Moral Majority for injecting religion into politics applaud the Council of Catholic Bishops for approving a Nuclear Freeze.

- In college I had a roommate who was a devout church-goer and who always insisted that politics was not the church's business. She was full of quotes: "Render unto Caesar those things which are Caesar's and to God those things

which belong to God" and "My kingdom is not of this world." The church, she said, was in the salvation business, not in the bureaucracy business.

American churches tended to take this hands-off view as long as the school day began with prayer, the school teacher was a church member, and history assignments didn't contradict what was taught in Sunday School, and they have tended to shift their position now that the public schools can no longer be counted on to reinforce church values. During the 1980 presidential campaign many one-time 'stay out of politics' church folk coalesced into The Moral Majority whose political agenda is to require America's institutions to again reflect and support church interests. Their drive to make the public school day begin with a prayer symbolizes their determination to regain control of the curriculum so that it will again confirm the values and virtues they affirm. They want evolution, sex education, and values clarification out, and courses in civics, Christian ethics, and special creation introduced.

- You're being quite a cynic. You're suggesting that religious groups stay in or out of politics on the basis of practical benefit rather than principle.

Churches and synagogues are human institutions. During the thirties the Vatican held its torgue on the evils of Fascism. Sometimes protecting the institution becomes more important than proclaiming its message.

- You'd argue then that the opposition of most Jewish groups to such programs as public suppcrt of parochial education reflects the benefit Jews have gained from the high wall of separation.

As must be clear from the Israeli experience, traditional Judaism does not insist cn the high wall. The separation doctrine helped us protect our rights against Sunday closing laws and Saturday elections, but today those responsible for the budgets of Jewish day schools have, by and large, ceased to be hardliners on the issue.

Let me say it again: our special message specifically links piety and public policy. God did not allow Moses to enjoy a quiet domesticity with his wife and sons in Midian. He was told to go back to Egypt to carry out God's will. The prophets insisted that God demanded acts of justice rather than sacrifices. "Who has asked this of you to trample my courts. . .I cannot endure iniquity along with the solemn assembly." Rabbis were encouraged to be active in their communities even in business - rather than to withdraw into a life of secluded piety. The mandate was clear: "Separate not yourself from the community."

Some years ago I visited an old synagogue in Lisbon. The wall facing the entrance door contained perhaps a dozen slots, each large enough to receive folding money. A brass plate above each slot bore the name of a service organization: Hachnasat Kallah, society for providing to brides; Bikkur Holim, society for the care of the sick; Hevrah Kaddisha, burial society. That synagogue raised and dispersed money for the welfare needs of the community.

- I'm not impressed by charity. It's simply an easy way for the wealthy to feel virtuous and to gain respectability.

Those who put money into these boxes were paying communal dues, not giving charity. Judaism teaches that today's giver might well be tomorrow's recipient and that financial success is as much a result of mazzal, good fortune, as hard work. I don't know a single line in our literature which tells either the rich man or the poor man that he deserves his lot. Hebrew has no term for charity.

- Let's not focus in yet on Judaism. I've still got questions about the general nature of religion. You gave us a functional definition of religion and you said that religions are necessary but not necessarily good. Since any religion which commands a group's allegiance is by definition functional and, therefore, useful, how does one decide between the religions of our world?

- And don't bring conditioning up again. It's importart but not a sufficient answer.

A relationship can be sick but within its own terms functional. We see this in certain marriages where the partner's needs and neuroses allow them to live together intimately but at the cost of emotional grcwth or ethical maturity. A Leader satisfies the dependency needs of his minors, but again, at the cost of their developing the capacity for independent living. Religious communities can be healthy-minded and encouraging or perverse and destructive.

Buddhism encourages asceticism and withdrawal. Medieval Christianity and Islam teach the damnation of noncommunicants. One tradition encourages independent study and interpretation of its Scripture; another demands submission to ecclesiastical authority. A tradition like Judaism which encourages moral discipline, social justice, the cultivation of the mind, an individual's freedom under God, ard the ties of human fellowship, has much to commend it.

- Everycne has a right to believe what they want to believe.

I'd be the first to insist on everyone's right to believe whatever he wants, but I need not approve his beliefs and, in some cases, I will protect myself and scciety from any dangerous actions his beliefs may lead him to take. I find the Hebrew term, le'havdil, useful in making these kinds of judgments and distinctions. In Hebrew when you wish to suggest that there are significant differences in quality or kind between phenomena of the same order you say le'havdil. So the sentence: Jim Jones, the charismatic leader who induced nearly a thousand followers to drink cyanide and, le'havdil, Martin Luther King were ministers who were active in the Civil Rights Movement; or the sentence: The Jonestown commune and, le'havdil, an Israeli kibbutz are examples of rural utopian communes. We must make le'havdil judgments when we are deciding which religion and which group within the major religious tradition we will join.

- The Jonestown group was a cult, not a religion.

There's not that much difference between a cult and a religion. Because most Americans hold to the romantic notion that any religion is good for you, the media tends to reserve the term "religion" for approved traditions: Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism; and "cult" for the likes of the Moonies, the Church of God and the People's Temple, but the distinction is not that clear. Until the fatal day when the community drank cyanide, the People's Temple remained an accredited member of the Disciples of Christ, a mainline Protestant denomination.

- Cults are small groups of weak and dependent people who find it easier to obey a leader than to work out their own problems.

Some cults are composed of the weak and the troubled who are led by someone who knows The Truth, but not all. Cults are groups of religious people who are a little hotter about their faith than most established congregations. The key element which distinguishes cult from religion is intensity. Cult members tend to feel that they alone will be redeemed since they alone possess The Truth. Most people have a family life and a work life as well as a religious life. The cultist is totally involved and unlikely to have any perspective on his group or its actions.

- You're describing a fanatic.

What one man will condemn as fanaticism another will describe as commendable zeal.

- Cults are dangerous.

Cults can be salutary or dangerous. It all deperds on the beliefs around which the group has rallied, the leader who gains authority, and what subsequent generations make of their inheritance. Most cults are like Jonah's gourd: they appear one night and disappear the next. Some abort. Some explode. A few emerge and become major religions.

- And all suffer from an excess of zeal.

- It's the zealous who change the course of history.

- And who chop off the heads of those who disagree.

- I've always been glad Judaism hasn't been as cult prone as Christianity or the Eastern religions.

I'm not sure you're right. We've had our share. Habad is a Jewish cult. In their time so were the Pharisees, the Sabbateans, some of the Kabbalist groups. Some people always care more than others.

- I thought Judaism de-emphasized emotional intensity and enthusiastic faith. My rabbi always told us: in faith, as in life, it's wise to look before you leap. One of the lines I like best in our prayer book speaks of "zeal tempered by wisdom and guided by regard for other people's faith."

Cults emerge in times of stress. During the darkest period of the Middle Ages a passionate cult developed around the figure of a false messiah, Shabbetai Zvi. A significant number of Jews declared him the Messiah and some held on to the view even when he converted to Islam. The "zeal tempered by wisdom" line was written by an American rabbi during the calm and prosperous years which closed the nineteenth century. Of course, our leaders have always tried to keep passion in bounds, otherwise, like water breaking open an inadequate dam, everyone is in danger who happens to be in the path of the flood. When Shabbetai Zvi failed his followers, a goodly number committed suicide. Many more died inside.

- Judaism still has aspects of a cult. I'm always troubled when I hear the Akedah story read on Rosh Hashanah. You know the story. God demands that Abraham sacrifice his son Isaac, and Abraham agrees to this unconscionable demand. I guess we're told the story to encourage us to be unquestioning in our loyalty to God. Soren Kierkegaard used the Akedah in Fear and Trembling to illustrate his contention that the man of faith must be prepared to put aside family feeling and what is generally considered morality when he hears the commanding voice. If I remember correctly, he calls this attitude "a teleological suspension of

the ethical." I call it fanaticism.

Kierkegaard read this story as a Christian. We read the story quite differently. In Judaism the Akedah myth served the same function as the crucifixion myth in Christianity which is to say it confirms the religion's promise of redemption. Christians believe Jesus' death symbolized by the Cross atoned for Adam's sin and, for the first time, opened the way of salvation to human beings. Jews held that Abraham's submission to God's command earned for Abraham and his descendants a special place in the scheme of things, what theologians call Election. The Akedah myth symbolized and established God's special concern for Israel. A drawing of Abraham, Isaac, the altar, and the ram were sometimes painted on the wall above the Torah's niche which was a focus of worship in Greco-Roman synagogues in much the same way as the cross hangs above the altar in a church. It symbolized God's close ties with Israel rather than any idea about the unconditional demands of faith.

- But Abraham still obeyed a command to murder his son.

The Bible does not hold up Abraham's conduct as a model for our behavior. Jews were not to pattern their lives after the Patriarchs but to obey God's Instruction: the Commardments.

- Still, it's a confusing story. Why read it on such a holy day? It gives the wrong idea. It certainly did to me.

Reading the Akedah on the High Holidays is an old practice which goes back to the difficult centuries when Jews felt it wise to remind God on the holiest day of the year that they could, in fact, depend on God's special relationship to pull them through.

- How do you explain the story to a modern audience?

Life often puts us to the test and when the issues are serious we must be willing to put our comforts at risk. I like to tell them the legend that the

horn of the ram caught in the thicket is the shophar which will be blown to announce messianic times. It becomes a text which says that beyond the risks inherent in life there is hope. I tell them not to be literalists. Biblical language is meant to be suggestive, not determinative.

- Kierkegaard did raise a critical issue which, I suppose, all religious people face. At what point, if any, should prudence, compromise, and open-mindedness be set aside? At what point do we say I won't be reasonable? What's right is clear and not to be compromised. Bertrand Russell somehow described Aristotle's rule of the Golden Mean as a rationalization devised by and for the respectable and the middle-aged to justify the tendency toward caution which comes with wealth and age. You can always find a reason to pull in your horns, but if you do you'll never achieve greatly. There are times when we have to take the plunge.

Boldness is a romantic virtue but not always a way to accomplish significant progress. In anty case, Jews start not with the Golden Rule but with Sinai, a set of original and demanding commitments. These are the given, the axioms, Judaism's special and surprising message. They point the way and no other way is acceptable. The virtue of the Torah is that principles are strong and demanding but not unrealistic or unachievable. They are rules by which people can live, establish families, conduct business, and establish a just social order.

- You'll have to be more specific tomorrow. We need time to clean up before dinner. The group dispersed slowly.