MS-4850: Daniel Jeremy Silver Papers, 1972-1993.
Series 4: Writings and Publications, 1952-1992, undated.
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Come On In, the Water's Fine, unpublished manuscript, third draft, chapters 6-15, pages 124-288, 1983.

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Chapter 6

FEEL DEEPLY - THINK BOLDLY

It had been a sunny afternoon and we'd been active outdoors. The sun had warmed our whole being and we seemed to be in a reminiscing mood.

- A few months ago my old Sabbath school principal called and asked me to substitute in a sixth grade class. I taught for a few weeks and was surprised by the changes. We studied Hebrew and history and they still do, but now they also have electives in Hebrew lettering and Jewish cooking. One group spent part of the morning doing carpentry, making a wooden ark.

Your school has gone in for what is called experiential education - Hebrew camps, Israeli dance festivals, and shul-ins - on the sensible grounds that the only way to appreciate the full range of what it means to be a Jew is to "jew:" to dress up for Purim, to correspond with a Soviet refusenik, to make charoseth.

- It sounds like busy work.

The older, didactic curriculum assumed that the religious school's task is simply to explain the whys and wherefores of a familiar culture. It was developed at a time when almost everyone had been raised in a tangibly Jewish home. Many of our children today grow up in a home which is a middle-class place, an American place, a television place, and only marginly a Jewish place. The Jewish commitment of their parents may be largely limited to board membership in a Federation agency, and the child probably has no understanding of the fact that to his parents this out of the home activity is a form of 'jewing.' Today, unless the religious school provides Jewish experiences, many will grow up without ever participating in them and will forever feel as outsiders to the Jewish way.

- When you talk of Jewish experience, I think of my one trip to the Catskills. The food was heavy and the portions were immense. At night the comedians laced their humor with Yiddish phrases. It was a forgettable experience.

There are many levels of taste in every community and cultural institutions to suit most of them. I wouldn't bring these comedians into my school, stand-up

comics of any stripe don't belong there; but I won't badmouth Jewish popular culture simply because it's not my cup of tea. It's superficial, but it's wrong to assume religion is limited to noble and pious sentiments. Religion can't survive in the rarified atmosphere. Since I look on religion, in the first instance, as a cultural phenomenon - which is to say that Judaism doesn't exist apart from the Jewish people - I'm not particularly given to separating Jewish experiences into religious and non-religious categories. My religious school kids sing Israel's folk songs as well as hymns and have staged "Joseph and His Technicolor Coat" as well as "The Story of Chanukah."

I had brought a copy of The Jewish Catalogue and passed it around. A few years ago a group of graduate students published this manual as a "do it yourself kit designed to open options for personal Jewish creativity." Forgive them their jargon. What they offered and what people eagerly accepted - the book's sale was a minor publishing phenomenon - was a primer for those who want to learn to "jew," a 'how to' book for a generation of Jews who hadn't learned 'how to' at home. Their thesis was that it's not enough to talk and think about Judaism, we absorb the world through the senses, and we need to touch and taste Judaism as well as know the facts about our history and theology.

- Your use of "jew" as a verb is disconcerting. Until today I'd only heard Jew used as a verb by anti-semites who think it a colorful way to describe over-shrewd bargaining.

I use "jew" as a verb to make the point that faith is caught, not taught. If you want to get involved you have to plunge in. Reading books about Judaism won't do it. I've taught university level courses in Judaism for many years, and a number of ministers and nuns have been among my best students. Their previous training had heightened their ability to put religious themes into perspective and they did well. I hope they gained some appreciation of the Torah tradition,

but I'm sure that nothing they learned changed their basic loyalties, nor did I intend it to. Knowledge is one thing; commitment quite another.

- I like the new approach. I remember wondering when I was in religious school why we spent so much time each year talking about the Sabbath. There was nothing special about the Sabbath. My father went to the office on Saturday and I played ball. Sabbath talk seemed irrelevant. It was something Jews had done a long time ago and old-fashioned Jews still did. It wasn't until I went to a youth conclave where we had Kiddush Friday night and a Havdalah service Saturday afternoon that I felt that the Sabbath might, in fact, be an attractive part of my week.

- And?

- And I went right back to my ball games.

- Our teachers hammered away at the theme that the Sabbath was the original labor law. They told us that in the old, old world an owner could work his slaves to death and that the Sabbath law was the first rule which gave peasants and slaves control over some part of their lives. I wasn't much impressed. All that was years ago. There are no more slaves. My dad's workers were all unionized. They worked a five-day week when they worked. Sabbath talk in the twentieth century seemed an anachronism.

- Weren't there some reformers who wanted to change the Sabbath to Sunday because that was the day all businesses in Europe and America closed down and everybody was free?

- I always thought the Saturday-Sunday switch made sense.

- I can't imagine a Sunday Shabbat.

Few could, which is why the switch, though it seemed to fit the times and promised certain practical advantages, never caught on. The Sabbath is one of

those elemental structures which give Jewish life its recognizable shape. It's part of the strong current which gives our river its identity.

I've always believed that everything I do must have a clear purpose. I won't clutter up my life with outmoded customs.

Utility isn't the only meaningful standard for what we do. Religious practices can have a value which transcend practical or utilitarian social benefit. They are the medium through which Judaism or any religion transmits its message and expresses its identity.

- My family had a reason for everything. The dietary laws were important rules of hygiene. Draining the blood from meat and salting it kept the meat from spoiling. Pork carried dangerous parasites.

The problem with that approach is that it misrepresents history. The dietary laws were originally intended to sequester the Jew from idolatry. The dietary laws proved to have some hygienic value, but these were secondary as far as the Torah is concerned to their original purpose which was to help extricate Israel from the persuasive patterns of idolatry which were ell about them in the pagan world. The Torah, as you know, prohibits the eating of pork or shell fish. The boar and the crayfish were the totems of gods beloved of Moab and Phoenician Tyre, two of Israel's close neighbors. It was the practice of these peoples to eat pieces of these totems at a communion meal much as Christians today take the wine and wafer at communion in the belief that through this rite some of the immortality and power of the god became part of the worshipper's being. The Torah's dietary prohibitions kept the Jew from participating in any act which oould be construed as pagan. The danger of limiting one's practice to rules which have a clear and specific utility is that this function is often overtaken by events. The Sabbath's value as labor law is minimal in a society where the five-day week is standard. Yet, the Sabbath and the dietary rules retain their value as forms which identify Jewish life.

- America's pure food and drug laws are far more effective and comprehensive than the Kashrut rules.

Precisely. If we defend Jewish practice on a social benefit basis, neither the dietary rules nor the Sabbath nor, for that matter, such customs as the writing of a Ketubah are compelling. Once upon a time the marriage contract protected the wife's dower rights in case of a divorce. Today court prescribed alimony protects her rights far more effectively.

- So?

So it's important to recognize that social benefit was not the primary purpose of many Torah-mandated practices. The Torah presents the Sabbath as a day of rest and emphasizes Sabbath observance as a way of aligning the worshipper with God's own schedule, "For in six days the Lord created Heaven and Earth and He rested on the seventh day, therefore, the Lord blessed it and hallowed it." Biblical men believed man and God should act in harmony. God's virtues set the moral pattern for man and His rules like the Sabbath, rules which God Himself obeyed, allowed the Jew to feel that he was actually aligning his life with God's.

- But some Torah rules have a clear utilitarian purpose: leaving the gleanings of the field to the poor, letting a field lie fallow every seventh year, the rules against theft, murder and idolatry.

And some rules have no discernable social benefits, like the prohibition against wearing a garment woven of various kinds of threads or the special forms of particular sacrifices or the specific colors of the robes the priests wore on certain occasions.

- Why should anyone go along with rules that don't make sense?

Rules make sense in various ways. Some are utilitarian. Some simply provide structure and shape for a family and religion. Some identify. Every society needs a New Year's Day and a Thanksgiving. Every family celebrates births and anniversaries. Every religion needs an identity, a form, a name, a special feel and

such events as the Sabbath and the holidays provide these.

- I'm not a goer-along.

What you mean is you're not a Jewish goer-along. You enjoy your weekends and stay home on Labor Day and Memorial Day.

- I've always looked on religious rules as dispensible, colorful, sometimes compelling, but take-it-or-leave-itable. Whenever I asked my rabbi, 'must I,' he'd say, 'if it feels right.' My sense of personal autonomy marks off the difference between 'you must' and 'if it feels right' and it's for that reason that I'm not an orthodox Jew. Yet, you're saying almost the same thing as an orthodox rabbi: that the medium is the message.

When your rabbi said, 'if it feels right,' he was saying - somewhat loosely - that no one will force you to observe this rule or damn you if you don't. I'm sure he didn't mean to suggest that Judaism is only what you want it to be. You may or may not sit shivah, but you know and he knows that holding a wake is not a Jewish option.

- If customs and rituals are so valuable, why don't you follow all the traditional forms?

It's a matter of proportion. On one memorable day when I was five I discovered where my mother hid the household candy. The same day I found out that there can be too much of a good thing. More is not necessarily better.

- If your test is not a role's social benefit, how do you decide which rules you will abide and which you will discard?

By what feels right, Jewish, to me and to others like me. It felt wrong to change the Sabbath to Sunday. Wearing a kippah at worship seems appropriate to most Jews, but though wearing side-curls and fringes defined being Jewish for many centuries, these practices have fallen out of fashion.

- Your justification?

A people's instinctive understanding of what is vital and what is superficial. In matters of religious definition the community is the determining factor.

- If most Jews had accepted the idea of the Sunday Sabbath switch, would you have gone along?

I honestly don't know. Obviously, communities sometimes make foolish or even fatal decisions and at times a determined and committed minority will feel the need to stick to its guns. What usually happens is that a compromise emerges and is accepted. I'll give you a for-instance. In the nineteenth century many non-orthodox rabbis and educators argued that the bar mitzvah ceremony should be dropped in favor of a co-educational ceremony, Confirmation. They had many good reasons to want to do so. Bar mitzvah perpetuated an unwanted male chauvinism adult initiation in an era where childhood was being prolonged no longer fit as a rite. In the modern world thirteen-year olds are not yet young adults. Confirmation, which came at fifteen or sixteen, corresponded more closely to the new maturation schedule. Then, too, there was an educational argument. Bar mitzvah focused entirely on the mastery of sufficient Hebrew to chant a portion, a Haftarah. Confirmation preparation was broad-gauged and dealt with history and concepts as well as language. Some congregations abandoned the bar mitzvah, but most Jews weren't willing to go that far. Something in the Jewish heart said, 'this is basic,' but the Jewish head also recognized the validity of much of the criticism. A parallel ceremony for girls, the bat mitzvah, was brought into being. Confirmation was kept and efforts were made to see that children didn't end their religious education at thirteen, change within the context of continuity.

- We wrote our own wedding service. It seemed right at the time, but now I'm not so sure. As I look back, our service seems more an improvisation than a consecration. I remember feeling that my parents were somewhat made uneasy. They must have felt emotionally left out. It was so different from their wedding that it didn't seem Jewish.

- I'm just the opposite. The old doesn't interest me. Ours is a new world. Your in-laws' feelings weren't the issue. It was your marriage, not theirs. At least your words were yours, genuine, not some old Hebrew formula which nobody could understand.

- I don't agree. For me much of the meaning of our wedding service was that I was taking part in an old and weathered ritual. Over the centuries tens of thousands of Jewish couples had been blessed with the same words. It felt comfortable.

I'm not married so I can't tell you how I'd feel, but I'm troubled by the argument which seems to me illogical that on the one hand the value of ritual and ceremony is that they define and give shape to our lives as Jews, and on the other that we can pick and choose among Jewish rituals and even reshape customs to suit our taste and that the resulting ceremony is somehow Jewish.

Judaism's shape has been changed by each generation of Jews to meet their needs and fit their taste. In medieval Germany the groom didn't stamp on a glass at the end of the wedding service; he threw it at a gargoyle on the synagogue's outer wall in order to drive away all evil spirits. Old forms take on new meanings.

- What gives any ritual its authenticity? What makes an event a Jewish ritual and not a happening? -

- Who decides what must be kept and what can be changed and how are these decisions arrived at?

What people feel in matters of custom, a community's preferences are determinative. Many European rabbis objected over the centuries to the breaking of a glass at a wddding. The custom smacked of superstition, but the community liked the custom, defined it as Jewish, and it was kept. The same is true of the Kol Nidre chant on Yom Kippur. There were rabbis who wanted to abandon the chant because they felt it laid Jews open to the charge of sanctioning dishonesty. The original text was a formula which released the Jew from all vows and obligations

he might undertake during the next twelve months. It was designed to forestall any guilt Jews might feel because of impulsive vows they might make to God, but it could be read more suspiciously and many sages didn't want to provide anti-semites grist for their mill. But the community loved the melody,associated the text with the continuing Jewish loyalty of those who were forced to convert, and would not give it up.

- But, surely not every practice depends on popular approval. Most of our practices are mitzvot, accepted as divine commands.

Agreed. The argument today centers on what is mitzvah command and what minhang custom. Many of us, I include myself in this group, have consciously enlarged the category of minhag to make it possible for Jewish life to cope with radical change.

- Give me a for instance.

The separation of men and women in worship. It's crucial that we make possible changes which reflect fundamental changes in family structure and perceptions of gender-based differences. In a world where women are accepted as equals, the women's balcony and the mehitza are anachronisms. The rabbis considered the separate treatment of the sexes as command, I don't. Practice has always been sanctioned by a sense of its appropriateness. Maimonides made the same argument about shrines, sacrifices, and Temple ceremony that I'm making about women's balconies and women rabbis. Jews, he said, patterned Temple worship after the shrines of their environment, but as they gradually came to understand the radical changes, their tradition sought to introduce into religious thinking. They created a more appropriate institution, the synagogue, but did not abandon The Temple until it was physically destroyed by the Roman army.

- I can see the value of ritual. Our lives are paced and pressured and we can all use a good bit of structure, but something holds me back from doing anything about my perception. I don't participate. I worry that if I did I'd

somehow be taking a step backward. I set great value on being liberated - a free spirit.

I'm convinced our age sets too much value on autonomy, going our own way. We need roots as well as a sense of our individuality; unfortunately, our society emphasizes only the breaking out, doing our own thing. Sometime ago I decided to submit a grant application for some programs my congregation was about to launch to a local foundation. The director and I had lunch. He wanted to be helpful. Over coffee he advised me to describe our programs as 'creative' or 'innovative' and as breaking new ground. I asked him if it might not be to everyone's advantage if monies were forthcoming to support existing programs. I am convinced our schools would have done better if they hadn't been encouraged to develop so many 'innovative' programs and had support in carrying out the familiar disciplines of reading, writing and ciphering. I was told a new age requires new ideas, and since they had the fund that I was asking for I didn't take the argument any further; but I'm convinced that we've not given many essential communal tasks the support they deserve.

- What's this got to do with my hangup about Jewish practice?

I was trying to suggest your problem stems from a whole series of cultural assumptions. We've been taught to equate the acceptance of traditional disciplines with dependency and the jettisoning family norms with independence. I suggest that this whole approach is based on a fundamental misunderstanding of the role of ceremony. I'm no less myself because I worship regularly. Worship reminds me of my responsibility at the same time that it signals community. Rituals can seduce or liberate. It's how we use them. An experience - any experience - can be profoundly challenging or purely mechanical. Some go to a symphony to be exalted, others to sleep, others to study the conductor's reading of the place. Abraham Heschel, one of the most concerned Jewish thinkers of our day and an observant Jew was active in the civil rights and anti-Vietnam movements and a man with a most original turn of mind. I remember hearing a lecture in which he made the point

that the Jewish structure of his private life gave him the strength to think through this conventional wisdom and arrive at his own mind.

- I guess it also depends on a particular religion's attitude towards ritual. Kissing a bishop's ring implies submission. Reading the Haggadah on Seder night reminds us of the obligation of freedom.

- I worry about people who accept ritual without thinking about what they're doing. We've already talked about this and you've argued that Jews have never glorified thoughtless commitment, but it seems to me that's what the mitzvah system is all about. 'Do it because that's what God wants.' At Sinai the tribes accepted the Covenant before they heard its terms. That kind of loyalty is dangerous in the extreme and I worry about those who leap before they look.

I worry more about those who don't look after they have made the leap of commitment. In life we have to make commitments before we can fully test them out; but only fools stay with commitments which diminish life and shrivel the soul.

- You can think too much and think yourself out of any commitment. There are always reasons not to. I'm pleased that we've begun to put more trust in our feelings. I'm a heart person, not a mind person. Mind people, the think tank experts, are the cause of most of many of our problems.

- What's this got to do with religious practice?

- I see the fact that more people are turning to ritual as an encouraging sign that we're learning to trust the heart more than the head.

I hope not too much more. I agree that candles and Kiddish are in and I hope I'm right that this is not an either/or situation, but a balancing out of an overemphasis of the mind which accompanied the first wave of modernity. Because of the flood of inventions and discoveries that have made our lives so much easier, machines ended the need to keep millions all their lives in back-breaking labor and provided a flood of goods, medicine had doubled the life span, many in the West proclaimed reason the supreme virtue of a new secular religion.

John Locke and his friends showed that all forms of privilege and arbitrary authority were unreasonable and Isaac Newton and his friends proved that careful research and reasoning could give us some control over the environment. The university was reason's sanctuary and the research scientist was the priest who served at reason's altar. Unfortunately, what reason gave with one hand she took back with the other. Doctors immunized whole populations and added millions of people to the role of the undernourished. Machines ended manual labor and shackled millions to mind-deadening work on assembly lines.

- Robots have changed all that.

- And put millions of people out of work.

I'm sure that one of the reasons I decided to become a rabbi was my feeling that while we have mastered physical power, we have not begun to master ourselves. I have nightmares whenever I remind myself of the kind of people who control the buttons which can launch a nuclear attack.

- What made you feel that being a rabbi would help?

I felt Judaism had rather nicely balanced reason and feeling and that if I could explain our approach to others and help them make it part of their lives, I'd have done a useful piece of work. Judaism is the only religion I know where equal emphasis is given to the cultivation of the heart and the head. The synagogue was both a classroom and a sanctuary. Rabbis have taught for centuries that wisdom should inform the act - an ignorant person cannot be a saint - and that wisdom which does not lead to careful and caring activity is not wisdom at all. The rabbi was a civic person and tribune of his people, not an ivy-towered scholar or a pious recluse, but it was never activity for activity's sake. One could be a <u>hasid shoteh,</u> a foolish saint.

- I want a vision and my rabbi, like you, gives me what he calls wisdom. I want to dream the impossible dream and he tells me to make sure I'm not embarked on mission impossible.

If you told me: "I want to drop out of college and do something for the world," I'd suggest, as I think your rabbi would, that a trained mind can do more for the world than an untrained enemy supported only by good intentions. Your rabbi didn't tell you not to serve, but to make sure that you're serving effectively.

- When God told Abraham to leave home, he went.

Take another look at the text. God tells Abraham to go and "Wherever you go be a blessing." Incidentally, ethical problem-solving comes in two models: Aristotle's and Abraham's. Aristotle, as you know, proposed a balancing of opposites, a calculation of consequences. Aristotle's approach is that of the cool and detached academic. Actions are to be restrained and temperate. Abraham also counsels moderation, but his approach involves a calculus of possibility. Abraham sought the path which would lead him and his to a better life. The goal is growth, not balance; action, not stasis. Someone called Abraham's way an obdurate morality of common sense, but that's not the whole of it. The standard is holiness. Aristotle's way is a balancing act. Abraham's involves moving ahead: "Press on to know God," "Seek peace and pursue it."

Almost without exception, Judaism looks on judgment and commitment as complementary and equally necessary virtues. Judaism is a both/and rather than an either/or tradition. Withdrawal and asceticism was encouraged by some groups like the Essenes, but most rabbis lived at home, married, had children and worked at some ordinary occupation. With us it's not the demon rum, total abstinence, but drink in moderation and chant the Kiddush. Materialism and greed are condemned as sins, but poverty is no proof of virtue. Where there is no bread, there is no Torah. The Jew prayed every day, "Grant us peace," but most were not pacifists

and self-defense was permitted even on the Sabbath. Jews patiently waited for the Messiah and, yet, worked toward the solution of the world's problems: "If you have a sapling in your hand and someone calls out: 'Lo, the Messiah comes,' plant the sapling first and then go to meet him." There can be "fools for Christ" but the strangeness of the phrase, "fools for Torah," speaks volumes. We are to live cooperatively and as a community, but selflessness is not the ultimate virtue. Each of us has an ego as well as a need to love and be loved.

- My father always said: 'There's no sadder excuse than I'm sorry, I really meant well.'

- You describe Judaism as a balanced religion. That's not the Judaism I knew as I was growing up. My Hebrew teacher had a ruler and wrapped us on the knuckles when we asked chuzpadik questions. Those who didn't follow the traditional rules were wrong or evil and that was the end of the discussion.

- My background was balanced against emotion. Our service was largely talk and follow-along reading. Its central feature was a sermon which was really an academic lecture. The rabbi was an intelligent man and my parents always said that they learned a lot from him, but people kept their feelings under close rein. Even the music was controlled and subdued.

- We belt out the songs. Some evening a group dances out the Torah portion. It's noisy, it's fun, but sometimes I want to think and there's too much commotion for that. The rabbi rarely lectures. He usually tells a Hasidic story. It's nice, but sometimes I wish he'd deal with some of the real problems of our times.

- So where is your famous balance? Everyone's experience seems to have been weighted heavily one way or the other.

We've all over-reacted to the pressures of our times. Life's no longer consistent. There have been too many shocks and changes. Some congregations and families remain convinced that reason and research will solve all our problems. If they gave that up, they'd be lost. Others are reacting to the failure of

science and reason to bring greater security into our lives. They can't see how we can call progress the fact that nations today fight with laser beams and hydrogen bombs while cave men fought with bows and arrows.

- The reaction against reason seems particularly pronounced among us. Our service is almost all sound and motion. The feeling's there but little else.

Reason failed the Jew in a special way. Once reasonable governments tore down the walls of the ghetto, Jews were confident our neighbors would see that we didn't have horns and that our traditions were as upright and forthright as theirs. In many countries we did gain citizenship, but our problems weren't over. France, the home of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity, produced the Dreyfus trial. Germany, the intellectual center of Europe, produced Auschwitz.

- Hitler was a paranoid.

Never forget that he was actually elected and that most Germans flocked to his banner, If you insist that what happened in Germany was an aberration, you must deal with England issuing the White Paper of 1939 which closed Palestine to Hitler's victims and our own country convening several refugee conferences in the late thirties not to save European Jews but to placate American ones. I don't find it surprising that the decorum and reasonable approach, which was typical of Jewish life here in the early decades of this century, has been replaced in most of our congregations with songs sung against the darkness and the comfort of participating in age-old rites.

- I read recently about a survey of Jewish attitudes whose major finding was that Jews feel a desperate need for community.

Another sign of the mood of the times was the phenomenal popularity of Fiddler on the Roof. The real shtetl was poor, full of misery and cruelty, a bleak place, not the paradise lost of the stage play. But it had intimacy and color, which are the emotional supports we apparently miss mist. Most Jews seem to want the synagogue to be a place where the loneliness of modern life can be overcome and

blandness forgotten. Incidentally, community is a universal need, Fiddler played to packed houses all around the world.

On a scale of one to ten, as a Jew I'm a two or three. I went to Sabbath School and I go on Yom Kippur. I came here to be with some friends as much as for the talk. I've found the discussion interesting, but, no offense meant, it was all surface - talk - until last night when we held hands around the campfire and sang Hebrew folk songs. For some reason the evening got to me. I understood why you've been saying, 'try it, you'll like it.'

- I may be a cynic, but I set little store on campfire conversions. I was active years ago in our Temple's youth group. I've been to institutes before and I've held hands in a dozen friendship circles and heard plenty of people say: 'I'm hooked.' Give them two days at home and they've forgotten all about it. For Judaism to mean something you really believe in the message. I like being at a Seder table: the food, the family, the songs, hiding the Afikomen. I get a kick when I rattle off "who knows thirteen" without looking at the book, but all that's fugitive. What stays with me is the Haggadah or, rather, its ideas about spiritual as well as physical bondage, and about the difference between "freedom from" and "freedom for." I know I have to wrestle with these ideas if I'm going to make my life add up to anything.

- In Confirmation class the rabbi talked a good bit about Passover and freedom and to tell you the truth, it went in one ear and out the other. I like Seder because ofx the songs and the food. It's only recently that I began to think a bit about the themes of Passover.

The two of you remind me of Maimonides and Ha-Levi.

- Thanks, but how so?

Moses Maimonides was a towering intellect, master of all rabbinic disciplines and a firm believer in the redemptive power of reason. Judah Ha-Levi was a poet of sensitive heart and passionate feelings, a philosopher who was willing, indeed eager, to acknowledge reason's limits. The two men lived in the same Seph-

ardic world at about the same time.

Maimonides trusted only the mind. Maimonides justified Judaism by showing that its teachings corresponded to philosophic concepts scholars then accepted as reasonable. The heart was impulsive; only the mind was constant and clear. The mitzvot were God's will, but happily, they also enhanced mental health and personal hygiene. Maimonides was an elitist who believed that a talented man could master life through the determined use of his intellect. He often complained about the noise of the synagogue next door and he dismissed as vulgar that synagogue's practice of parading the Torah around its hall. His prayer was the calm outreaching of the mind rather than the uncontrollable expression of a troubled heart.

Maimonides wrote prose, brilliant analyses which awe the reader with their analytic precision and logical acumen. He provided sophisticated answers to sophisticated questions, but had little time for the simple needs and confessions of ordinary folk. He defended Jewish interests at the governor's court - he was the governor's personal physician - but he did so by quiet representation and not by carrying a placard demanding the caliph's resignation. I cannot imagine Maimonides in an unbuttoned shirt, sitting crosslegged at a campfire, holding hands with friends while they sing an endless series of Hebrew folk songs.

Juda Ha-Levi trusted his heart. He had studied philosophy long enough to know the bitterness with which philosophers disagreed, so he was not abashed when he stepped beyond the limits of logic. He looked on the mind as a useful instrument, but commitment, he knew, begins in the heart. Ha-Levi trusted people and spoke easily to all he met. The inconsistencies of talk were dearer to him than the orderliness of theory. He presented his philosophic ideas as dialogue and he wasn't bothered if they didn't fit neatly into a coherent system. He sang openly of his feelings and paraded around the synagogue without self-consciousness.

Maimonides married to have children. Ha-Levi sang of love, wine, and nature and sometimes of the delights of the flesh. He rejoiced in friendship and in the

bustle of life. He might be charged with occasional excess, but never with indifference. Maimonides spoke gravely and advised Jews to face their problems with patience and prudence. Ha-Levi was extravagantly committed to the mystery of Israel's chosenness and wept for the Messiah. When he could no longer wait patiently for the Messiah's arrival, he left Spain for Zion where, according to legend, he was cut down by Arab cavalry as he prayed before the gates of Jerusalem. Ha-Levi's spirit was full of feeling, passionate and compassionate, democratic, poetic, responsive to the grand redemptive themes, intensely Zionist and, above all, immersed in and concerned with the fate of Israel. Ha-Levi tried to show Judaism as a self-sufficient reality and he judged its teachings by their impact on each Jew rather than on their logical consistency.

- You've been saying, I gather, that though each of us tends naturally one way or the other, our times have made Ha-Levians of most of us.

Precisely.

- Is that good or bad?

It depends how far the balance shifts. Unthinking commitment is as undesirable as unfeeling intellectualism.

- What I want are the special moments. I want to participate in some larger and better power, to be taken out of my present self so I can become my better self.

- You remind me of a story about a Christian missionary who came across a Hindu ascetic sitting cross-legged beside a lily pond, watching the sun set over the water. Eager to save his heathen soul, the missionary sat down beside the ascetic and talked into his silence about the truths of Christianity. The mystic did not look at him or reply. Frustrated, God's salesman redoubled his efforts, marshalling impressive texts and arguments. Still, his only answer was silence. Not to be dissuaded, the missionary reported the miracles God had performed and spoke

eloquently of God's might and saving power. Again, only silence, but after awhile the ascetic slowly raised his hand to point to a lily which was beginning to bloom as darkness set in.

- That's it, awe, reverence - call it what you will. It's what I want out of a service.

The lily is a beautiful flower, but I confess that I would point not to nature's beauty but to what the spirit of God in man can accomplish: an El Greco figure, a Beethoven quartet, Keat's poetry and, beyond all these, the Torah. I find God's saving power in all the accomplishments we call civilization.

- I've no trouble with such spirit-of-God talk. What bothers me is the tendency to localize God's spirit in and only one religion. In Religious School I was taught to define Judaism as ethical monotheism: the affirmation of the oneness of God and of the centrality of ethical living. Judaism was presented as a set of moral principles which I or anyone could usefully follow all my life. That made sense. What doesn't make sense is all the ethnic add-ons. They serve only to divide us from those who are trained in other traditions.

Ethical monotheism was a particularly useful term for those who felt that we have reached a stage in civilization when people could and would dispense with an articulated set of religious practices and realize the common ethical perceptions which presumedly all peoples share. Ethical monotheism also provided them with a rough but useful pair of garden shears with which they could prune Judaism of an overgrowth of medieval folkways and customs. When the ghetto walls came tumbling down and Jews were able to be part of the modern world, much of this underbrush had to be cleared away and the term, ethical monotheism, provided a simple measure of what was thicket and what true forest.

- Obviously, you're not enamored of the term.

It's too abstract and too bland. It might be applied as easily to Islam as to Judaism; yet, certainly, Islam is not Judaism. The Torah tradition <u>is</u> ethical,

it is monotheistic, and it is much more, and that much more includes Rosh Hashanah, the Sabbath, midrash and siddur, the huppah and yahrzeit, Hebrew and Yiddish, Ayn Kelohenu and Hatikvah, hallah and matzah. As a label ethical monotheism failed to give due weight to those experiences which were and are uniquely Jewish; and, as we've just heard, encouraged the belief that all customs and cultural experiences are parochial and dispensable. As I've said before, a Judaism which is nothing more than a few noble ideas cannot deal with life as it really is. Ethical monotheism sounds good, but it doesn't tell me what specific standards are intended by the term ethics.

You're raising what I call the Golden word problem. Golden words like peace, justice, righteousness, are significant only if they are related to a specific context. As a child I heard Hitler and Stalin speak of peace. In recent years I've heard Andropov speak of peace and Ronald Reagan and Yasser Arafat. When I hear our president speak of the need for peace in the Middle East I know he means that he wants an arrangement which will provide the United States unhampered access to oil and profitable markets and reduce Soviet influence in the area. Ethical terms have no meaning outside a particular context. The general category ethics describes a subject area, not specific standards, and adding monotheism to ethics doesn't help much. Islam is an ethical monotheism which affirms the right of jihad, holy war.

- I hate it when a discussion gets stuck on definition. Someone uses a simple word and everyone jumps on him. A guy I grew up with has a guru. He quotes his master all the time, visits him, and gives him most of what he earns. He says that for the first time in his life he feels at peace with himself. I know he's under a spell, but he asks and gets answers. When I ask, I get asked what my question meant.

Would you, like your friend, give up your independent judgment in return for answers which may be no more than someone's all too confident opinion?

- A neighbor was at loose ends until he joined Habad. He says they made him feel welcome and whole. Before he had nothing but questions about himself and Judaism; now he says he has answers. I don't think much of his answers, but he's happy.

Are you sure your young friend's happy?

- He's paid a price. He won't eat at home. His parents' kitchen isn't kosher enough. His girl left him. He wanted her to join Habad, but she had her own plans. Still, he seems happy enough. He's certainly no longer as high strung as he was. By the way, how did you know that he was young?

The late teens and early twenties are the vulnerable yerars. So much is happening so fast. It's a time of sexual awakening, when we explore a whole range of new emotions. We have to adjust to the strange and rather frightening adult world. I'm sure you can remember how conflicted you were and how impossible it seemed to get from here to there - from being a student and a dependent to being a self-supporting, self-confident adult. People's need for certainty, for a confirming system of values, increases sharply during any uncertain passage.

The cults thrive when people feel pushed and confused. They thrive today because many grow up hearing parents say one thing, peers another, while their teachers had still other ideas. The media come at you with a variety of conflicting values and blandishments. Some can't cope with this relentless barrage of experiences, opportunities, and conflicting advice. Their emotional systems reacted like overloaded electrical circuits and simply shut off. That's when a guru or cult leader becomes a godsend. He says: 'stop worrying, I'll do your thinking for you.' Some can't cope with this relentless barrage of experiences, opportunities, and conflicting advice. Their emotional systems reacted like overloaded

electrical circuits and simply shut off. That's when a guru or cult leader becomes a godsend. He says: 'stop worrying, I'll do your thinking for you.'

- Other generations didn't turn to cults.

India was much further away than it is today. In the early part of the century the new gods were Marx and Lenin and the new scripture of the various socialist doctrines which provided all the answers.

- I tried the Eastern way. It didn't work. I'd tried Judaism first. I went to the Temple library and did some reading. I learned more than I cared to know about customs and ceremonies, but it was all surface stuff. What I read didn't speak to my needs or answer my questions or make me feel right about life.

It's the guru, not his published works, that appeal. The answer you need to the basic commitment questions isn't in any book.

- Then why do so many people regularly read the Bible? They're certainly looking for answers and many must feel they've been helped.

Those who pick up a Gideon Bible in a motel room are already more than half convinced the words will help. They treat Biblical texts as talismans and mantras.

You say you tried Judaism by doing a bit of reading. I must warn you, there's no such thing as instant Torah. An old wise religion like ours knows that gurus and evangelists offer lovely but naive simplicities, not the stuff of wisdom. Judaism can't be reduced to a few sentences. Judaism doesn't pretend to have an explanation for everything. "Seek not to explain God's ways to man for these are beyond your understanding." The sense that life fits together is there, but also the thought that anyone who wishes to gain wisdom will have to think deeply about his experiences and that the best way to do so is to spend days and months living and worshipping the Jewish way.

- What's wrong with wanting answers? You've emphasized the fact that all religions exist to provide the community with a sense of coherence and to ratify certain values.

Life is too complex and mysterious to be comprehended in words. Socrates stands for all those who have taught that we cannot live by other men's definitions or philosophies, however convincingly argued. The ultimate questions cannot be satisfactorily answered by a few lines of thought. They must be answered in the living. I offer you Judaism, a way of life, and not a few words which claim to answer all of life's questions.

- You're avoiding the issue. I want straight-forward answers.

- If you can't give me the truth, what can you do for me?

We can talk about the consequences of a decision to take up our way of life. I can guide you into a Jewish way of life. I can show you where to begin and make sure you're asking the right questions of life. I can tell you what others have felt and felt they learned. I can keep you from plunging down dead ends. We're not the first generation to wonder. I'm not asking you to accept anything on blind faith, but I want you to recognize that you can't go at your religious problems as you would a research project. It's not a question of problem solving but of developing new understandings and capacities. We have to think out and live out our religious commitments.

- I know rabbi means teacher and that's really the role you've been describing, but that's not all you are. My rabbi's a good teacher, a good Joe, but when he puts on a pulpit robe and stands at the pulpit he seems to be saying: 'I'm a holy man', - and I know he's no different than I am.

Holiness is in the eyes of the beholder. In Talmudic times, and more recently among the Hasidim, it was widely believed that certain rabbis could successfully intercede with God for those in need, that their advice was inspired, and that their blessing could heal. The traditional rabbi was a learned man who was also a holy man - if his community felt he was.

- Holy men, the whole lot of faith healers and amulet writers were/are charlatans.

- My rabbi would be the last person to claim holy powers.

I don't think of myself as a healer, but I have performed miracles, not because I am an adept or even interested in laying on the hands, but simply because people came to me expecting a miracle and their faith made a 'miracle' happen. The need to believe is in each of us.

- I don't doubt your experience, but I find such credulity sad, beyond belief, and I'm troubled when religious leaders encourage people to believe they can cure diseases which are resistant to medical science. Too many religions play on our desperation and our dependency needs.

Don't generalize. If I encouraged dependency our talks would consist of testimonies which certified my healing powers and of my telling you without any qualifications: here is the truth. I like the fact that Judaism has been successful in keeping Torah rather than a holy man out front. I'm impressed by a religion like ours which can imagine God saying, as He presumedly did to Isaiah: "Come, let us reason together."

- I've a born-again friend who insists that she is a changed and better person since she accepted Christ and was saved. At times I've enjoyed being a Jew, and I know that being Jewish has subtlely affected many of my attitudes; but I cannot imagine myself saying after a Yom Kippur service, 'everything is clear, I'm saved.' Now that I think of it, I've never heard a rabbi speak of being saved.

My Habad neighbor never uses the term, but it seems to me that he would make the same kind of claim as your Christian friend.

Being saved is a Christian's term for the emotional high people get during a binding experience. Actually, the prototypical experience occurred to Jacob. Jacob defrauded his brother Esau of his birthright and, fearing Esau's anger, fled the family campsite. His first night in the wilderness he's alone, unarmed and afraid that Esau will come after him with blood in his eyes. He sleeps unprotected

on the open ground, a prey to attack by robbers or wild animals. He dreams. In his dream he sees God and hears God say to him: "Do not be afraid. I am with you." When he awakens the Bible has him say: "Surely, God is in this place and I knew it not." This sense of awakening, of becoming aware of realities we had till then not perceived, is the essence of a binding or conversion experience. It's a moment when our imagination takes over and, to our surprise, we see, or think we see, another reality beneath and behind the world which is normally present to our senses. What happens actually is that under pressure we tap dormant spiritual resources and, as we do we experience a surge of power which makes us feel what we had not felt before, a surge which gives us a wonderful sense of being alive in a way we may never have sensed before.

- If it's such a wonderful sensation, why doesn't Judaism make a big thing out of being saved? I'd welcome a 'born again' experience. I'd like to put my doubts to rest, but I can't imagine having a binding experience in my synagogue. It's a place of much talk and little awe.

It needn't be so. There is much about our worship - the chant, the song, the swaying, the spirit - which can open us up to the surge of holiness. When a Jew fasts the twenty-four hours of Yom Kippur, immerses himself in the service, imagines himself standing before a heavenly court, thinks deeply about his life and God's will, becomes aware of his sins and his power to change the direction of his life, unexpected power often surges through him. I've felt that Yom Kippur surge.

- Why don't rabbis talk openly about their religious experiences? They're always explaining and analyzing when a bit of personal experience would be much more effective. I find the quiet witnessing of a Quaker service compelling in ways our bookish service is not.

Sharing another person's experience can be a moving experience, but not necessarily a useful one. The mood is fugitive. Part of the appeal is simply that we enjoy looking in on other people's lives, but I often think the appeal of

public witness and of the television soaps derive from the same voyeuristic impulse and our desire to live vicariously.

Then, too, there are dangers involved in emphasizing testimony. A skilled cult leader can stage an experience which will bind many to him. The art of emotional manipulation is well-known. At Nuremburg thousands of German youth were powerfully and permanently bound to Naziism.

- When we read William James' psychological classic, Varieties of Religious Experience, in college I noticed that none of the mystical experiences he recorded happened to Jews.

James cited evidence from the world he knew and his Protestant world has always cultivated witness and testimony. Protestantism, in opposition to the Catholic assertion of papal authority, based its claim to authenticity on the right of any believer genuinely moved by God's spirit to interpret God's will. Rituals, like witnessing, were devised to encourage church-goers to anticipate the inrush of the Holy Spirit and to trust that experience.

- That sounds like a recipe for religious anarchy. How would you ever know whose experience to believe?

That's why there have been so many Protestant denominations, but what was lost in consistency was made up in immediacy.

- Then you value structure more than immediacy. I don't.

With me it's both/and. I don't fully trust the inrush of the spirit for all the reasons I've given you, and I know that I can't live a religious life which is enlivened only by the testimony of others.

- Some years ago I thought I had found the truth. I won't go into the whole story, but I had a religious high. Everything was in place and then it all fell apart. I crashed and was crushed. I was convinced God let me down. It took me years to acknowledge that God hadn't let me down. I had deluded myself into believing that I had answers when all I had was a few pat phrases and an illusion

or two that by force of wanting something enough I could make it happen.

- I'd still like answers.

We all would and there are plenty of religious leaders out there who are ready to offer them to you. Unfortunately, faith can't do all that such men claim for it.

- Why not?

Faith doesn't change our objective situation. Faith can't heal a broken back or a broken world or free us of chemical addiction. We may desperately want to change our lives, but wanting is only the first step in renewal.

- You're not as encouraging as some of the T.V. preachers who assure me Christ will straighten out my life.

I believe in truth in advertising.

- I've watched a few of those programs. They must do some good. I've seen people get up out of wheel chairs and walk. I know alcoholics who insist only faith in God allows them to get a handle on their problem.

Faith works except when it doesn't work.

- Does a binding experience ever really turn a life around?

Binding experiences often point us in new directions, and once we've taken the first step a great deal changes for us. Abraham obeyed God and never turned back. There's a time when you know without saying it that you're a committed Jew and will probably be all your life. But that doesn't mean you won't have doubts or that being Jewish will resolve all your personal problems. I'm a committed and well-informed Jew, but I've not resolved all the contradictions of my nature, nor have I gained equanimity, and I don't really believe I ever will.

- But there are Jewish binding experiences.

Of course, but don't expect them to come as a bolt out of the blue. The first step is an active involvement. The more you open yourself up, the greater

the chance that you'll be moved. I like the rabbinic phrase: God is wherever man will let Him in.

We'd come full circle. It was time to move to the pantry for a late snack and less intense talk. We'd come back to the question of faith in the morning.

Chapter 7

JUDAISM IS

It was a bright morning. Everything and everyone was fresh. I began with a bit of family history.

- Twenty-five years ago my father wrote a book in which he tried to distinguish the Jewish world outlook from that of other philosophies and religions. He entitled his manuscript, Where Judaism Differs. An editor, convinced that people, book buyers, no longer believed that there were significant differences in the teachings and attitudes of the major religions, tinkered with his title and the book was published as Where Judaism Differed. He assumed that a study of past differences might be bought for its historical value, but a manual on present day differences would have no market since it would be looked on as irrelevant. He felt, and I think many would agree with him, that today most people share a few basic ideas about God and goodness and pay little, if any, attention to the religious differences which have caused so much bitterness and division over the centuries.

- What about Ireland?

- Or the Middle East?

I suppose that like many other white, well-educated, culturally literate, and determinedly liberal people, he simply dismissed the religious wars in Ireland and the Middle East as relics of medievalism, unfortunate but soon to be outgrown.

Actually, he badly misread the times. Since World War II a tidal wave of religious passion has rolled across the globe. Sectarian violence has been a daily fact of life in Ireland, Lebanon, the Soudan, Iran, India, Pakistan, and Indonesia. Tens of thousands have died in what are, in effect, religious wars. Nor have religious tensions been limited to the underdeveloped countries. Canada has almost broken into two parts along religious lines: one French Catholic, the other Anglo-Saxon Protestant, and our own political life has gotten embroiled in

a whole range of religious issues: creationism, Federal aid to parochial education, the right-to-life amendments, the prayer in public school amendment. . .

- Your father's editor and my dad were cut from the same cloth. Dad dismissed all religious writing as self-serving scribble about what couldn't be known and didn't need to be known. He would go on at length about Galileo, Spinoza, and Scopes, citing their trials as proof that religious groups are afraid of real knowledge. Superstition, which for him included religion, would disappear as learning and science spread. I can still hear him say, you don't see witch doctors at Harvard. I thought of him when you talked the other day of America's civil religion. He believed in love, justice and progress and took for granted the value of democracy, social reform, and individual freedom. Like your editor, he had the disadvantage of being an educated, mildly liberal, middle-class, white American male who was so secure in this country's power and prosperity that he was confident its values, his values, would soon be accepted by the rest of the world.

- What's wrong with those ideas? People turn to crime and violence if they have been brutalized by poverty and dehumanizing institutions. In the jungle you have to be a predator. Fortunately, society doesn't have to be a jungle. As more people experience security and love and have the advantage of a decent education, they'll open up their hearts and not be so quick to strike out. These energies which now find an outlet in violence will be sublimated to more useful ends.

From your mouth to God's ears. I wish there was evidence that deep inside each of us is, in fact, a loving and kindly person. Despite good homes and countless opportunities, suburbia's children can be as delinquent as those who are raised in the city's streets. Caring parents and cultural advantages do not and cannot guarantee the child will become a decent and gentle adult any more than a broken home and a tough neighborhood make it inevitable that a street kid will

grow up to be a hood.

- Children are born innocent, loving. We make them what they become.

Not so. In the final analysis we make ourselves. Freud opened our eyes to infant sexuality and its survival drive. Every baby is a bundle of needs and human nature is always full of contradictions.

- Let's get back to your father's editor. You dismissed his argument that religious differences are no longer relevant on the basis of his failure as a political prophet. I'll agree he was no Drew Pearson, but he may only have jumped the gun. I'm of a younger generation than that editor and I'm convinced, as are most of my friends, that despite differences in custom, Judaism and Christianity teach essentially the same values: love, kindness, character, and that no one has time any longer for the old theological arguments.

- I'm your age and I don't share your feelings at all. Religious differences still matter - a lot. I fought a lot of kids who called me Jew boy or worse. My college room mate tried to convert me. I was thrown off a team because I wouldn't kneel in the locker room before a game and pray. How can you doubt the power of the various religions? Arabs have been fighting a holy war against Israel since before I was born. A million Hindus and Muslims were killed when India was partitioned and that war flares up intermittently. I still find it incredible when I read of college women in Iran thanking the Ayotollah Khomeini for ordering them back into purdah.

We're back to the fact that religions are human phenomena and that, despite their concern with themes of redemption and holiness, they inevitably reflect all the dark passions human beings are heir to as well as their white hopes. The Shiites of Iran under Khomeini are embarked on a holy war. They overthrew the Shah. They want to overthrow the Ba'ath government of Iraq which they call atheist. Their eyes take on a glazed look at the prospect of a crusade to free Jerusalem from the Jews. We're not used to thinking of clergy sitting as the hanging judges of a drumhead court, but there they are and, at the same time, we must recognize

that Khomeini's Islam provides millions of Iranians a sense of liberation and vindication.

- How can you defend Khomeini?

I'm not. He's a fanatical leader of a religious group which has a long history of violence and excess. I'm simply making the point that the world-wide religious revival, of which Iran provides perhaps the most dramatic instances, should not have been unexpected. People need religions the same way they need names. Moreover, religious passion feeds on social stress - the more convulsed the present the more desperate people become to hold on to the so-called certainties of the past.

- You're talking about Asia and Africa, not modern societies like ours.

Where Judaism Differed was published in 1956 just before ethnic, racial, and religious pride burst on the American scene. "Black is beautiful" was about to become a popular slogan. Blacks, it turned out, wanted to be black, not white. Spanish-speaking parents wanted their children taught their native language. Christians wanted to be evangelical, not simply ethical.

- I find this search for roots, this return to religion, an ostrich approach to life. It's a way of saying, 'there are problems I can't solve, so I'll bury my head in the sand.' Jerry Falwell isn't the answer for America and Khomeini isn't the answer for Iran.

It depends on what question you're asking. If the question is how can the world prepare for the twenty-first century, neither man has the answers. No one can turn back the clock. But if the question is how to retain your balance on a slippery slope, how to preserve family structure or respect for eldlers or a sense of the value of old-fashioned virtues, then they speak to the real needs of many people.

- Why can't we have Khomeini without the killings or Falwell without the Moral Majority? Religions should be good for children and other living things.

Some are. Many churches and synagogues have taken enlightened social stands,

but a religion's message inevitably is shaped by the interests of its community and these always include some of the deepest and the darkest moods and needs of the human soul. The prophet may be a man of God, but he is also a man who, like Jonah, may not want to go bestir himself.

No religion is ever totally free of the passions and prejudices of its community. Religions reflect their times. The religions of Ireland have for so long been at war that they've lost their ability to act as effective peacemakers. Islam in the Arab world is so unsettled by modernity that it's lost its ability to adapt its values to the new situation. Judaism's no exception. Despite warnings as far back as Bible days about the dangers of the dark underside of religion, we've had our fanatics and magicians. The Torah is quite explicit. Jews are not to practice magic or sorcery nor to act as soothsayers or diviners or to cast spells or to traffic with ghosts. The rabbis attacked those who in their religious zeal lost sight of what God never forgets, the needs of ordinary people and the humanity of all peoples. I love the prayer book phrase, "Zeal tempered by wisdom and guided by regard for other men's faith." Still, we have our zealots who throw stones at cars which drive by on the Sabbath.

- The problem is that people allow emotion to run away with them and that religious leaders want total submission. I've always appreciated the fact that rabbis never asked us to kiss a ring as a symbolic act of submission.

- Rabbis preach.

I tell you what I think. I try to suggest useful ways to think about Judaism, but I readily admit that Judaism has no monopoly on The Truth and I'd be the last to claim that you'll go to Hell if you don't say 'Amen' to what I say. At times I think my approach to Judaism may be too reasonable.

- How so?

I sometimes see so many complications that I allow Judaism's special message to become unclear. Most people prefer a charismatic, assertive leader to a sober-minded and sensible teacher, a Svengali to a Socrates.

The confident opinions of some religious folk wouldn't bother me if I could see that they were better people for their beliefs. Unfortunately, while I was growing up we lived next door to an observant family. The father went to shul every day. He also was a terrible autocrat who terrorized his kids. A few years later I read that he had been charged in a business scandal. I'd like to see someone write a book on why Judaism fails.

You wouldn't need a book. The answer's too simple. Judaism, any religion, fails because, to use the Biblical phrase, 'they have eyes but they see not, ears but they hear not.' There are always those who like the color and structure of religion but who won't or can't hear what its ceremonies and rituals try to convey. They like the cover of the book but don't bother to read what's inside. One of the reasons our services include a sermon is that the spoken word adds a dimension of meaning to ritual.

- Speaking of the faithful, why do so many find it so difficult to accept that people who hold a different point of view not only have a right to their opinion but may have good reasons for it. I'm on our School Board and we've just gone through an ugly scene when some parents tried to tell us that books like The Lord of the Flies and Native Son mustn't be assigned to English classes because the books encouraged immoral attitudes.

One person's morality may be anathema to others.

That's true, but not very helpful. Morality is not entirely a matter of individual preference. The real problem is that anyone who has convictions cannot be totally open-minded.

- Then, by definition, religious belief breeds intolerance.

And so, by definition, do liberal political and social beliefs. When people agree with us we have convictions; when they disagree we're close-minded and intolerant.

The problem with our convictions is not that we act on them, that's inevitable and necessary, but that many are tempted to try to force their beliefs on others, to get books we consider offensive off the shelves and to ban certain shows from the air.

- That it's one thing to believe that abortion is wrong and quite another to insist that the law of the land must reflect your opinion. Few really resist the temptation to try to coerce others to live by their standards. Jews have an advantage in this respect. Having been a minority for so long we're a bit more sensitive than most to moral coercion.

- If so, many Jews have forgotten all they learned. Look at the determined way the orthodox in Israel have set about forcing the state to close down on the Sabbath.

Don't blame all the orthodox. Many do not agree with the government forcing their non-orthodox neighbors to obey Sabbath blue laws. Unfortunately, there is a highly politicized orthodox hierarchy who have determined to use their political power coercively and have, to a large degree, gotten their way because no government can be organized without their support.

- I hope you're not surprised. That's the religious way. Those who believe can't imagine anybody can be a person of character and not be one of them. Religions are by nature coercive and divisive. Look at the religious wars. Look at the Middle East and Northern Ireland. We should blend all religions together, take the best of each, and put aside all divisions.

It can't be done. Religions emerge out of a community's historical experience and present needs. Religions cannot be artificially grafted on a community.

What about the missionaries who converted Europe's barbarian tribes?

At first Christianity was a thin veneer on top of popular pagan practice. It took centuries for the message to get through. Fifteen hundred years later the Christian tree and the Easter egg remain as symbols that paganism affected Christianity almost as much as Christianity, paganism.

Religions, like people, have an ancestry and their individual identity. While it's true that all religions perform essentially similar social and psychological functions, identity of function is simply that and no more. Shamanism, the Moonies, and Judaism provide direction and a vision for the lives of their members but not the same vision or direction.

- Some day there will be a world culture.

Not for a long time, if at all. Attempts at creating world-wide cultural forms like Esperanto haven't been particularly successful, and we need for our mental health our special identity and group identification.

- Science and technology will make us one.

Everyone may use a TV, but the Chinese will watch different programs than we do.

- Let's not get into the East-West question. I agree that for as long we'll be around, East is East and West is West. I can see the major differences which separate the Western and Oriental religions, but Judaism and Christianity emerged in the same world and even share a Bible. Peoples often speak of a Judeo-Christian tradition. It seems to me that these differences can and will disappear.

Don't minimize even these differences. What is Torah to Judaism is Old Testament to Christianity. The Christian message centers on a myth - about a Saviour who died for men's sins - and on the promise that faith in that sacrifice is the key to salvation. The idea of redemption through faith runs counter to most of Jewish approach.

- We share the Ten Commandments.

Formally, but not functionally. Jews read, "you shall not murder." Their version, "you shall not kill," fits the 'turn the other cheek' teaching which is generally attributed to Jesus but runs counter to the Torah tradition which specifically permits acts of self-defense, including war and capital punishment.

- You're making pretty heavy water of minor differences of translation.

Like an artificial mound, a , where no rise ought to be. Minor differences in translation point to major cities buried underneath. Here language suggests major differences as to the authority of most of the Torah;s Instruction. The Jews, at least theoretically, accept all of them. There are six hundred and thirteen. Pauline Christianity developed its own complex set of rules but claimed that Jewish law, Torah law, stands in the way of the spirit. Michaelangelo's majestic statue of the seated Moses shows him holding the tablets of the law and the tablets are bare. Only the Ten Commandments were accepted. The rest were dismissed as parochial and outdated rules. Therefore, Christian translations of the Ten Commandments did not have to take the rest into account. The results are religions which are different in specific description as well as in theology and ethics.

- Be specific.

Christianity tends to emphasize faith and love as if these were self-validating entities. Law, at least Jewish law, was seen as an obstacle to the free expression of the spirit. The rabbis believed in faith and love but insisted that these must be grounded in and controlled by a specific way of life. They had much less faith in undirected enthusiasm.

- That's theoretical, not specific.

The rabbis insisted on the importance of community and communal norms. They discouraged those types of piety which emphasize seclusion and withdrawal.

- We share the hope of peace on earth.

But we express it differently. The Christian vision is of a world joined in the mystic body of Christ. Our vision emphasized the Jewish people secure in Zion and all the various peoples of the world enjoying justice and peace in their own place. The emphasis is on peace and justice rather than being joined in a single religious communion.

- You're raising issues which do not touch our lives. I doubt that these differences in myth, monastic attitude, and messianism matter to most Jews and Christians. Most probably do not even know these differences exist.

But they do, and I'll show you one way to prove this fact to yourself. Ask a few friends if they agree with the sentence: religion is a private matter. I've always found that most Christians quickly say 'yes' without any qualification. Most Jews will think awhile before they agree, and then will add something about the importance of community. Jews everywhere support Israel, welcome Soviet emigres, worry about fellow Jews in South Africa and the Argentine, and organize fund-raising drives for caring institutions and the relief of needy Jews everywhere. The rubric, 'we are one,' is more than a slogan. Our Christian neighbors support many worthwhile social institutions, but I think they would be surprised if they were asked to help the poor in the world because they are Christians and not simply because they are poor. Jews are surprised that Christians do not feel the same instinctive sense of family they feel. I certainly find it strange that the World Council of Churches has spent more money supporting the Muslims in Lebanon than the local Christians. Christianity is a faith; Judaism is the faith of an extended family.

- We count on public issues. Ministers, priests and rabbis marched together in Alabama during the early days of the Civil Rights Movement and in Washington kduring the peace rallies.

On some issues. Major elements of the Protestant Church argue that the public school day should begin with a prayer, a position I, and most in the Jewish community, oppose. The Roman Catholic bishop of Cleveland and I work closely in

the area of public welfare, but we are on opposite political sides when it comes to federal aid to parochial schools. I support the Planned Parenthood Association and, I am sure, he does not.

- You're professionals and, if I may say so, much more concerned with theological niceties than your flocks. A majority of Catholics practice birth control and many Jews send their children to parochial schools.

- It's interesting that your differences are mostly over personal and gender-related matters: birth control, divorce, abortion, homosexuality etc., areas in which the clergy really have little special competence, rather than social justice or peace issues.

Don't overlook the fact that we share concerns about the integrity of family; the sacredness of marriage; proper care for the elderly; and the proper training of the young.

- How then do you come to such divergent positions on matters like divorce and abortion?

We start from different premises. Christianity emerged into a Greek world whose tendency was to separate matter and form, body from soul; and to describe the soul as eternal and pure, and matter, the flesh, as perishable and impure. Early Christians were deeply influenced by this dualistic approach which encouraged many leaders to praise celibacy, describe marriage as a concession to the flesh, and set high value on ascetic disciplines such as fasting and the mortification of the flesh which were believed to free the soul from its prison within the body.

- We had our monastic celibates, the Essenes. I've been to Qumran.

The essenes are the exception, not the norm, in Jewish history. Our tradition emerged in a West Asian cultural environment where the body and the soul were accepted as a single unit, inseparably intertwined. The Bible generally treats love as a natural and healthy human expression. "Three sights are too

wonderful for me, four which I know not: the way of an eagle in the air; the way of a serpent upon a rock; the way of a ship in the midst of the sea; and the way of a man with a young woman." Marriage was labeled kiddushin, a sanctification, and our folklore even imagined God enjoyably spending part of each day as a marriage broker. Nachmanides, a thirteenth-century sage and mystic, praised the sexual relationships between men and women not only because sex produced children and fulfilled the commandment, "be fruitful and multiply," but because pleasure was given and received.

- I. B. Singer writes about Jews who roll in the snow and fast for long periods. Some of his saints even practice celibacy.

My point is not that such people never existed among us, the Bible speaks of Nazarites who drank no wine and never cut their hair, but that asceticism never became a consecrated discipline. Most rabbis married and led what we would call normal lives. Many simple folk marveled at the piety of those of ascetic temperament and even ascribed magical powers to them, but the sages did not declare their way superior to those who worshipped God with a whole heart and after a good meal.

- Let's go back to today's topic: whether the old differences still matter. I think you're right that they do - and that surprises me. Reagan certainly mimed the old-fashioned religion appeal during his 1980 campaign. I read someplace that for the first time in more than a century a majority of Americans belong to some official religious body. Most people with whom I grew up assumed that in short order most Americans would abandon their small town parochialisms, and that included their denominational affiliation, put all that behind them, and join in a society of men and women devoted to human progress and reason. I never expected to see many of my friends and my children's friends wearing a cross or a Star of David around their necks.

I've certainly seen this change of mood in the liberal synagogue. A decade or two ago our services were full of good thoughts and a few Hebrew phrases.

Today there's much more ritual and Hebrew. When I was ordained thirty years ago I would not have believed that a time would come when I would be concerned that ritual practice might become a form of idolatry in the Reform movement.

- Don't confuse the need for distinction, to separate oneself from the mass with religious piety. As a psychologist I know that we often wear costumes to make sure others identify us properly. We teach children a sport and then divide them into teams and dress them up in different colors so they can compete. The growing emphasis on dress and ritual may actually testify to the success of the acculturation process. Since our lives don't feel different, and we need to feel some distinction, we surround ourselves with the symbols of distinction.

Most emotional patterns respond to a number of deeply felt needs. I'd add the tendency of the third generation's search for roots and the fact that our culture emphasizes full-bodied participation. 'If you're going to go swimming, don't simply put your toe in the water, jump in.' I think also there's a peculiarly Jewish motive at work. Hitler made us recognize the folly and failure of the chameleon approach of the older generation. German Jews tried to be more German than Jewish and it didn't do them any good. We've relearned the familiar maxim: to thine own self be true.

- The suggestion that since we're no longer different inside, we emphasize costume and ritual, so as to feel Jewish intrigues me. What you're saying is that we're holding on to distinctions which reflect any substantial moral or spiritual differences.

I'm not ready to agree. I think for some it's the way they try Judaism to see if it fits, but with most it's a way of recognizing that identity begins in and requires involvement - the older words - all the fine explanations are not enough - if we don't adopt some of the special practices of the Jewish way of life.

- I respect you and I respect the orthodox rabbi who was my Hillel director. You're both well read. You both care about Judaism and Jewish survival; yet, your views are poles apart.

He and I probably find that less surprising than you do. We know our river bears many similarities to the great Chinese rivers, the Yellow and the Yangtze, which flow in shallow channels and are notoriously prone to flooding, often flowing for miles in both the old bed and in new channels which the water has cut in the soft soil of the central plains. Judaism has never had a strong central authority like the Papacy so when the pressure for change is at flood tide, there's no one with the power to restrict change and the river flows for awhile in several parallel channels. He and I also both know two rabbinic proverbs: "Let your debates be for the sake of Heaven" and "Both this position and another can be the words of the living God."

Unity does not require uniformity. The Torah tradition has always been remarkably many-sided. The book of Leviticus mandates a complex sacrificial code; Amos and Isaiah doubted the efficacy of the shrine and of sacrifices. The book of Ruth accepts the normalcy, if not the fitness, of intermarriage; Ezra summarily ordered the citizens of Jerusalem to divorce their non-Judean wives. Until quite recently modest polygamy was permitted in some Oriental communities, but was prohibited in Europe. Today there are not only the well-known differences between the orthodox and non-orthodox but many not so well-known differences among traditional scholars on such issues as the drafting of women into the Israeli army and organ transplants.

- Their differences are minor compared to those between you and my Hillel director.

But not minor to them. Believers in uniformity and difference are a threat.

- Differences must have some justification. How can you both think you're teaching Judaism when you teach such different things?

- I've got a different question. You presented the river metaphor to emphasize the dynamics of religious development. The river image assumes continuity, that whatever happens the current flows to the sea. I wonder if the river may not have split into several quite separate branches. Orthodox and non-orthodox Judaism seem to me to be different phenomena.

The differences are great, but there's that sense of peoplehood, of a common destiny, which we've talked about and all of us share many elements of culture including, importantly, a calendar. Jews of every denomination observe the holidays according to the ancient Biblical calendar; give to the UJA and to the local communal agencies; worry about anti-semitism, the prisoners of conscience in the Soviet Union and the security of Israel.

- You may be right, but the differences often seem more prominent than the ties that bind. Some months ago I attended a debate between a Reform and an Orthodox rabbi on the issue of the ordination of women. I left convinced that they lived in different worlds. I can't imagine the liberal rabbi saying, as the orthodox man did, that God wants the sexes to have separate and distinct tasks or blaming women's liberation for the breakdown of family and personal values.

- A few weeks ago the local orthodox rabbi invited the Roman Catholic Bishop to speak at his congregation. He's never invited our rabbi and when I asked him why he said something about not certifying those who mislead.

Despite all our difference, in my city there is an assembly of leaders from all the congregations and almost all groups are represented nationally in a Synagogue Council.

- I was at a Bar Mitzvah service recently where God was never mentioned. I was told that this group kept the holidays and many customs. There was an oneg shabbat after the service. They believe that God is an outmoded concept and they proclaim themselves humanist Jews. Are they Jews? Interestingly, the familiarity of the surroundings served to heighten my sense of unease with what they'd done.

- What do they worship?

- Light. They go on at length about the divinity within each of us.

They're Jews. We're not by nature reader-outers.

- Spinoza?

There were exceptions, but you won't find in our Talmudic history anything approximating the spate of Christian synods which fought over the definition of orthodoxy and shut the doors of the church to all who disagreed.

Judaism, as I said, involves community as well as ceremony. I can appreciate the honesty of their feeling, but it bothers me that they need to build such defenses against God's spirit. I don't like single-issue congregations. I didn't like it when the Reform movement helped organize synagogues specifically for homosexuals. There are good reasons to remove the stigma which surrounds homosexuality, all are dear to God, but there are few if any good reasons to create a special synagogue for them. A single-theme synagogue is an artificial community - just as a synagogue limited to rich folk or to humanists would be. "My house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples."

- What holds us together?

I said it before: 'we're a community of faith and the community of fate.' We're a committed family.

- Families quarrel and break up. You can't force a family to stay together.

In any family there will be 'my way is the only way' types. Jews have/do walk away, but fortunately, most of us recognize that Jewish life, like family life, requires compromise, patience and love.

- That's too romantic. My family has Hasidic ancestry and my grandfather used to tell me how the Polish rabbis tried to excommunicate the early Hasidim and actually excommunicated the early Reformers. We've had our zealots, but in time Judaism's basic good sense usually reasserts itself. The attempts to ban Hasidism didn't last very long.

One of us feels more bound to the weight of tradition than the other. Take the issue of homosexuality which we referred to in passing awhile back. Orthodoxy can quote specific statements which condemn all homosexual acts. I would emphasize texts which suggest that no one should be treated as a misfit or outcast.

- What do you do about the specific condemnation?

In effect, set it aside.

- On what grounds?

As a rule which has seen its day. It seemed critical in ancient times to separate Jews from the conventional profligate homosexuality of the Hellenistic world; today it seems to me more important to give dignity to all segments of society. Incidentally, I disapprove of careless hedonism quite as strongly as the priests of ancient Israel.

- How do you decide when to go along with the tradition and when not to?

My rule is to break with the rabbinic approach only when it seems out of touch with the moral concerns of the times. Not surprisingly, my biggest argument with the traditional consensus comes in the area of women's rights. I believe in women rabbis, women cantors, women congregational presidents. It troubles me that the orthodox continue to deny to a woman the right to initiate divorce proceedings, to offer testimony in court, or to read from the Torah during public worship. For better or worse, the facts of modern life and spirit of the times impose certain needs on our religious lives.

- Why keep the old laws at all?

Every community needs structure just as every individual needs a name and a pattern of discipline. Most of the old rules still have merit, particularly in as careless an age as ours has become. I respect the strong emphasis on personal discipline and loyalty to one's vows and obligations which the halacha emphasizes.

- Where you see community I see disarray. Everyone seems to be doing their thing and calling it Jewish. One of my friends has entered a yeshivah in Jerusalem.

Another has taken up revolutionary politics. Both say they're doing their Jewish thing.

I'd like to see a more united community, but I also know that strong differences of opinion are a sign of life. You don't argue when you don't care. Moreover, debate for most of us can be part of an illuminating unifying process. I noticed this tempering process during the argument over abortion. Liberal Jews no longer condescendingly dismiss criticisms of abortion as a birth control technique as medieval, and I've noticed that some recent orthodox responsa have begun to take into account the diagnostic and surgical capacities of modern medicine.

- A point of interest. An orthodox rabbi recently published an op-ed piece in the morning paper in support of the Right-to-Life Movement. Why did the tradition take such a restrictive position on abortion?

The old rule was developed for an underpopulated world where infertility was a constant problem; where "be fruitful and multiply" was the first law of the Torah; and where surgery was primitive and dangerous, to be resorted to only if there were no alternatives. The rabbis discussed abortion almost entirely in terms of still birth or a life-endangering delivery since the option of a safe operation during the first or second trimester of pregnancy was out of the question. Their issue was limited: the mother's life or the baby's. Today abortion is a safe surgical procedure best done during the first trimester, our world is overpopulated, and our concerns must include how to enhance the quality of life; whether to force a mother to bear and care for a malformed or unwanted baby.

A young woman, who to this point had sat by quietly, began to speak with some heat.

- All this is interesting but irrelevant. Who cares what some old fogeys said about abortion or sex or morality generally? Today no one consults a clergyman

on such matters. We take our advice from professional counselors.

I'm sure you speak for many, but I don't see any evidence that your generation is happier or more fulfilled than any other because you've read The Joy of Sex. I can point out many whose lives and marriages have been thoroughly messed up because they've treated sex clinically rather than as a consecration.

- Are you opposed to divorce?

No. There are times when a relationship clearly won't work. The Bible stipulates divorce. I'm bothered when a marriage is entered into offhandedly and broken carelessly. That's the way children act, not mature adults.

- Thank God we've buried the double standard and the pall of guilt which religion encouraged.

I haven't advocated a return to Victorian hypocrisy. We're a passionate, not a repressed, people; but our standard is Kiddushin, a sense of the sanctity of all human relationships. Human beings aren't meant to relate to one another like barnyard animals.

I believe in the new morality.

So do I when it's moral, and I must confess I find that the term new in this context often puzzles me. Free love and open marriage were popular themes of Cleopatra's Egypt. The young Ecclesiastes tried the new morality in ancient Judea: "I searched my heart how to pamper my flesh with wine. . .I built me many many houses. . .I made me gardens and parks. . .I got me delights of men and women, very many. Whatever my eyes desired I kept not from them." In my book morality begins in responsibility, not indulgence.

- The new morality seeks to remove sex from the center of all moral discussions. Many of those who made such a to-do about continence and marriage vows were the same bastards who ran sweat shops and worked teenage miners sixty to eighty hours a week for pennies.

You'll find that the prophets of Israel were on your side. They spent more time decrying social injustice than sexual permissiveness.

- We're trying to be open and honest, no more taboos.

Fine, but honesty is only a beginning. I know people who have no illusions about themselves but who haven't done much with their lives. Honesty doesn't excuse inaction.

- I won't do anything I don't agree with. I won't be conned by the State or the church. I'm responsible only to myself.

Fine. One of the tradition's most important admonitions is not to follow after a majority if they're going in the wrong direction. But there's such a thing as making too much of one's independence.

- Never. It's my right to be myself, to lead my own life, to make my own mistakes, to manage my destiny. I am responsible only to my conscience.

You're a child of your time. This country has a two-hundred year history of ingraine suspicion of all authority, and we've now added all restraint. How does the song go? "Don't Fence Me in," We tell our children to make up their own minds and we set greater value on their going their own way than on the ties of family. I'm afraid the civil religion tends to balance justice and freedom so as to give freedom the greatest say.

- What's wrong with that?

Simply the fact that we're social creatures who must not only develop independence but the art and structure of interdependence. Responsibility means to be responsive to, to care about, to limit yourself in favor of, to love another as you love yourself. Some of my fiercely independent friends remind me of medieval monks. Their life style is anything but monastic, but they are as single-minded and as involved in the needs of their soul as any cloistered Benedictine. The community needs their energies and talents, but they are wrapped up in what they call personal fulfillment. In their book they're liberated. In my book they're irresponsible.

- I have only one life to lead. Why should I stay in a marriage that isn't fulfilling or have children if I don't want them or work in a presidential campaign

if I don't really care who gets elected?

Your first statement, 'I have only one life to lead' isn't accurate. You're not alone. You've never been alone. Your parents decided to have a child and cared for you when you couldn't care for yourself. A doctor healed your illnesses, set your broken bones and immunized you with vaccines developed by skillful researchers unknown to you. Teachers, coaches, counselors, friends, all helped you along and so they or their heirs have rightful claims on your time and energy. We live within a network of obligations and we are not only derelict in our duties but incredibly selfish when we deny these claims on us. You owe! That's why. One of Judaism's central teachings is Al Tifrosh min ha-sibbur, whatever you do in life do not separate yourself from others: friends, family, community.

- That's old-fashioned talk.

So be it. Our society's over-emphasis on independence perverts almost every area of our lives. Marriage has become a constant tension because there are so many justifications for calling the relationship off. Growing old in America has become a sad and lonely episode because we have made a fetish of children being on their own, away, apart from their parents.

- So what do you suggest?

That we begin saying not "I'm going to do my thing" but 'I will do what I can for myself and others.' How can there be a lasting marriage if each partner is determined that the fulfillment of their desire comes first? Our hero is a Moses who leaves the comforts of a quiet life to lead his people and who accepts all the aggravations that entails; and not a Gautama who withdraws from the cares of family and the responsibilities of governance to save his soul.

She wasn't convinced, but it was time for each of us to do his thing - clean up for dinner - so that we'd all enjoy dinner together.

Chapter 8

BUT I DON'T BELIEVE IN GOD

My problem's simple: the synagogue is a place for believers and I'm not one.

It was Friday morning. The posted schedule indicated a Sabbath service at sundown.

You don't sign Articles of Faith when you join a congregation. Synagogue membership is open to any Jew.

- I'd feel out of place.

You wouldn't be. The synagogue began as a beit am, a center where the Jews of a town met for fellowship, study and prayer, and it remains an open institution. The synagogue was a quite different institution from The Temple shrine which was God's house, carefully attended by priests. It was simply the home of Jews joined to hear the Torah read, to worship God, and to discuss the needs of the community. Everyone was welcome. "Let all who are thirsty come and drink." After 70 C.E., when the Romans destroyed the Jerusalem Temple, Jews were left without a sanctuary. They needed the sense of a holy place so they transferred to existing synagogues some rites - like the blowing of the Shophar or the blessing of the ethrog on Sukkot - which had been restricted to the Temple.

- That would explain why most older synagogue buildings are so unspectacular. I spent a summer wandering in Europe and when I'd had it with cathedrals and museums I went looking for synagogues. The few I found were, to say the least, architecturally modest. The biggest of them, like the Sephardic Synagogue in Amsterdam, would fit easily into a corner of St. Peter's in Rome.

Religious architecture is a good indication of the community's beliefs. Europe's cathedrals were royal palaces where courtier-priests ceremoniously presented people's petitions to the Lord., and the Church's continued the hierarchical division of feudal society. The nobility had the front pews and screens separated

the clergy from the community. The synagogue had no screens or reserved boxes. In the traditional synagogue the reading desk was usually in the center, close to everyone, approachable. God was close and caring. In God's sight all are equal.

- You're saying synagogue membership is communal rather than confessional, but there must be limits. An atheist certainly is out of place.

The synagogue has a point of view, but no one is denied entrance if he has.

- I couldn't pray.

No one would escort you out because you remained mute.

- Why would a non-believer ever want to join?

The synagogue is more than a prayer room. In America, particularly in the smaller communities, the synagogue is the center of Jewish life; and almost everywhere it operates not only as a place of worship but as a cultural and community center. It's a forum, a lecture hall, a library, a museum, a theater. Jewish life involves more than doctrine and most synagogues explore all aspects of Jewish civilization. Jewish life is not limited to those who affirm the traditional creed. The young socialists of the first and second aliyahs, the pioneers who built the State of Israel, were mostly agnostics, but they committed themselves to an unmistakably Jewish mission.

- They didn't form synagogues.

The kibbutz was their synagogue. Here in America we live in a different social setting, a pluralistic urban society where it's rare for groups to form their own settlements, and agnostic Jews, having no other real alternative, often join the believers in establishing synagogues and partake of those activities which met their needs. I have a friend who comes to services quite often, he likes to hear my lectures, but he makes sure I know that he doesn't daven. Why does he come? To be with Jews, to hear a Jewish word, and to be able to argue with me later about my lecture.

- I can't help it, I feel like a hypocrite at services.

No need to. A hypocrite is one who puts on a false face and plays a role de-

signed to delude others. You're not trying to deceive anyone.

- God's a big problem for me. There must be some creative source which binds everything together, but I can't believe that there's an all-knowing, all-powerful being up there or out there. I once saw a cartoon of a group of monks watching a beautiful sunset over the Grand Canyon and calling out: "Author, Author." I've had that feeling and I can't believe that the wonders of nature are the result of a cosmic accident. Big bangs produce chaos, not beauty. I guess I'm a pantheist but I, too, have my doubts about the God the synagogue service talks about, a God who answers prayers, heals the sick and comforts the wounded.

The God I acknowledge is the informing spirit of creation, not a separate supernatural being. The God I believe in is omnipresent, so no instrument, telescope or microscope will ever focus in on Him. I, too, have doubts about God listening to and answering my prayers. What I want, generally, seems so insignificant. Often I discover late I'm better off for not having my wishes met, but I feel certain about there being a divine purpose. I can't believe God spends His time waiting to hear from me.

- Why?

In school my special study was history and everything I read suggested a dynamic unity within and behind the discrete events and objects of our daily experience. The more I read the more I sensed an unseen current underlying what appears on the surface. The human being has a soul as well as a body and a nervous system. History is more than a random series of events, the unfolding of society's potential. There is evolution. Nature includes all manner of objects, bound together in a remarkable, seemingly purposeful, unit, and the supportive capacity of the universe and these facts strongly suggest to me that there is a divine purpose. Later I found much of what I had worked out for myself echoed in the writings of the Protestant theologian, Paul Tillich. Tillich defined God as depth, what is below the surface of everyday life, the ground of all

being. I'd put it a bit differently: God is not up there or out there but at the heart of life. God is the mysterious force which gives to all that is its spiritual dimension.

- Be that as it may, the synagogue God, at least the God the prayer book talks about, presumedly hears prayers, talks to us through prophets, and promises redemption.

I believe in a responsive God but not in a magician God.

- What's the difference?

I believe that the gift of life and consciousness is a greater miracle than any recorded in the ancient texts. I believe strength flows from an unseen source to those who need it, but I do not believe that God spends His time listening to our petitions. The common view is that prayer informs God about our needs, but if we think twice about it we recognize that if God is God He certainly knows our needs before we utter them.

- Then why pray?

Prayer permits us to tune in on God's wave length. Most of the time while I'm driving I keep my car radio on an AM news station, but sometimes I switch to the FM band and I find myself listening to the classical music station which is at the same place on the dial. I think of prayer as part of a switching process which allows us to perceive some of the mana, that's Scholem's word for the power, the encouragement, the guidance, which exists at the heart of life and which is on another wave length than the one we are plugged into most of our lives. These important resources within ourselves and within the universe are or can be tapped through prayer. It's in that sense that our prayers are answered. We gain perspective, encouragement, perhaps a deeper wisdom.

- If prayer does what you say, it's simply because someone is so desper-

ate that they'll believe anything. Prayer may tune us in to new strengths, but that doesn't mean God's on the other channel. What happens is that when we get desperate enough certain emotional circuits are switched on and we unleash an emotional surge which allows us to do what would, under normal circumstances, be impossible. I've watched faith healers work. They play on people's desperate need to believe, and if they're sufficiently suggestible the chain-ridden will walk, at least for a moment or two. They make it seem as if the cure comes from God. It doesn't. It comes from within.

You're too certain of your conclusion. I remind you of the rabbi who was asked, 'where is God,' and answered, 'God is wherever we let Him in.' May not that source of resilience and strength be some part of God's being?

- Death is death and cancer is cancer. Prayer can't change the facts.

I never said that prayer will change what you call facts. The Talmud says that a pregnant woman should not pray that the baby be a son - sons were an economic asset, daughters a liability - because the child's sex had already been determined. She should pray for a safe delivery.

- Then why pray?

Because she needs to and it will make her feel easier about delivery and the chance of its being a safe delivery will have improved. Often the prayer itself is the answer. In lifting up your soul to God you've lifted up your spirits. Prayer will not put dollars in your pocket or food on the table, but it can put courage in your soul and hope in your heart.

- God hasn't done anything.

Are you sure? The person in need has been strengthened.

- I've prayed and not only not been helped but not felt encouraged.

Did you really pray or were you testing God? Many of us have preconceived ideas about how our prayers must be answered. There's a lovely story of a saint who was on a boat that began to sink. Fortunately, a fishing boat was nearby and land came alongside to take everyone off. The saint refused to board. He had prayed

to God and God would save him. He drowns and when he gets to Heaven he challenges God for not having answered his prayer and God calmly answered: "I sent you the fishing boat."

- If prayer is primarily an emotional release, why pray? An evening of music or a long walk out of doors can also soothe the savage breast.

Emotional release is your term, not mine. I spoke of lifting our spirits and letting God in, not of letting go. It's a latching on to the universe's hidden strengths rather than of letting off steam or releasing the pressure of our anxieties.

- Fine words, but it really doesn't help.

- I've a friend who lost a young child in a terrible accident. Numbed by her grief, she found that for a long time prayer was the only form of expression she could manage. She didn't know why she prayed. She knew prayer wouldn't bring back her child, but somehow prayer helped her keep some hold on her sanity and she told me some years later that during this period she found herself thinking: get a social work degree and grace your grief by helping others. It was a new idea and she felt it had come from outside her, from God. Incidentally, she got the degree and has made a life for herself.

- Religions encourage prayer, so they can picture God as kind and benevolent. We wouldn't need prayer if God really was the protective Father fht faithful make him out to be. That child didn't deserve to die. That mother didn't deserve her grief.

I can't answer for God, but I don't believe that His purposes, whatever they are, are sadistic. Quite the contrary. Much of life's cruelty exists because of us, not because of God except in the sense that he gave our lives meaning by giving us freedom. Because we're free, careless and weak people will sometimes get drunk and get behind their car's steering wheel. If they hit someone is it

God's fault? If we launch wars or are ecologically careless there's a price to pay and we can't expect to run back to God and say, 'I didn't do right, please make it right.' God made it quite clear at Sinai. There's a price to pay for carelessness and greed.

- But a baby's dead. It isn't fair. At worst, the drunk driver will pay a fine or spend a few years in jail.

Freedom is a blessing which entails great risks. Every choice we make affects ourselves and others, sometimes for good, sometimes for harm. Statesmen declare war and may survive the war in well protected bunkers while foot soldiers and civilians die. The gift of freedom imperils us all, but few of us would want to live without it.

- Before we get to Job's questions about God, I want to satisfy myself about the very idea of God and my relationship as a Jew to it. As an agnostic what kind of meaningful identity can I have as a Jew?

Each year I ask the Confirmation class to write about their beliefs. Fourteen-year olds remind me of butterflies as they begin to shake off the restricting cocoon and I had brought several papers written by this year's class with me because I knew that sooner or later we'd get to this issue. These youngsters have outgrown the protective but circumscribed world in which they were nurtured and are emerging uneasily into a new environment; but it's so unfamiliar that their movements are erratic and often seem misdirected. It's not easy to leave behind, with old toys and a favorite teddy bear, the God of the nursery, part guardian angel, part doting grandfather; yet, that's what's happening to them. One had told a lie and had not been caught. Another had prayed to God during her grandmother's illness, yet her grandmother had died. It's a time of uncertainty, and I encourage them to write freely about their doubts, and many do:

This grim world really scares me. Every once in awhile I realize the cruelty and insensibility of it and that's when I begin to wonder. We can't just be here to disagree, fight, and eventually blow ourselves to bits. There must be some purpose or reason behind us. That is when I think of God. This ideal is, in a measure, a crutch to lean on. It gives me some hope for the future. I believe I have outgrown the 'old man in the sky watching over me' type of feeling though I can't really describe what has replaced it. Sometimes I can't really accept God, I know you'd like me to, but I might as well be honest about it - probably because the abstract concept is over my head. When I look around and see the hatred and ugliness, I don't understand how God could allow it. The closest I can come, from my experience, is conscience as that part of us which is created in God's image.

* * *

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

* * *

I havke not yet developed any definite ideas about God and I probably won't for a long time. I feel there is some reason and some kind of logic in life and why men live, but I am not saying it is God yet. To me God is a concept which is simply accepted by many - by those who actually study it and then accept it. I feel it is accepted only after accepting certain things on faith. I am not ready to say that a divine something created the earth and controls everything in it. There is too much to make this unbelievable -= such as the fact that if God doesn't like bloodshed, why war? If God wants peace, why battle? If God wants unity among men, why segregation? I feel that man as a society is much too complex to push off on

something man doesn't even comprehend. I furthermore think that with advancement will come a totally new idea as to what controls us - an idea which will be able to be expressed in mathematical symbols. I also believe that too many people have looked for an easy out to the whole question of life and death and origin and end and have simply attached the tag of 'God' to it all. Something much more complex, in my opinion, is the answer.

* * *

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

- They're teenagers. They're expected to have questions and doubts. My question was about adults like us. Do you have doubts?

Have had. Have. Will have. When I was a child I felt that someone in Heaven was watching over me and would give me what I wanted if I behaved myself and asked nicely. I stopped believing in a fairy grandfather when I discovered, as most children do, that God rarely gave me what I wanted.

- And?

As I grew a bit older, it dawned on me that I wasn't the only person on earth whom God had to worry about. I decided to ask Him only for what I really needed. Sometime in my early teens I recognized that my parents didn't give me everything I wanted and that for them saying no was often harder than saying yes, and was an even greater proof of their love.

- So you rationalized God's inattention.

You could put it that way. I prefer to say that I came to recognize that faith represents our attempt to grasp the mystery which lies behind the surface of things, and the essence of mystery is that it is elusive. If faith were simply

a matter of affirming some self-evident argument, then doubt would be an act of arrogance; but, as Immanuel Kant proved nearly two hundred years ago, neither the existence nor the non-existence of God are demonstrable propositions. Faith transcends proof., The mystery is never fully resolved. At best, we discover better ways to phrase our questions.

My brother's an untroubled believer. I doubt he ever has questioned God or the universe.

Faith is much like love. Some relationships develop easily and naturally; others are full of crises and self-doubt. Some struggle the long night with their doubts - remember the image of Jacob wrestling with the angel - others simply, almost unconsciously, let God in and that's that.

- I wonder what these kids think about Confirmation. They're not sure about much of what Judaism's all about. Confirmation must seem something of a charade to them.

Confirmation is not an initiation ceremony. They've been Jews all their lives. To confirm means to affirm publically what is already the fact. There's no moment in the Confirmation service where a candidate swears loyalty to a particular formulation of beliefs. As I said yesterday, Judaism is not a confessional tradition.

- When I think of my Confirmation I don't remember feeling I was living a lie. I had doubts, but this was a ceremony everyone my age took part in. I felt part of a community. My parents cared and we felt very close. In many ways Confirmation was what you called earlier a binding moment.

- I don't remember all that happened at Confirmation, but toward the end we stood up and recited The Shema. Please explain something I've never understood. We believe that Jews did the world a good turn when we discovered monotheism. Certainly, almost everyone in the West eventually accepted the idea, but what difference does it really make if people worship twenty gods or one god?

Monotheism suggested, not demanded, different perspective on the world than that which was the conventional wisdom of the pagan world.

- How so?

Monotheism opened the way for science.

- That's strange. I've often thought that God was simply a term we use to explain all the phenomena we can't yet explain in any other way.

The ancients looked on their idols as representations of powers which reside in nature and make nature work. The moon moved across the night sky and was replaced in the morning by the sun and no one knew what held these bodies up or moved them along their orbit. The wind rose for reasons no one understood and no one knew where it came from or where it went. Men knew the acorn grew into an oak tree, but when they opened the nut they did not find in it a baby tree. So they explained the tree's growth, the wind's passage, the sun's orbit, by assuming an in-dwelling god, an animating power, who made it grow or move in just its way. As long as men assumed an in-dwelling God they had no reason to look for impersonal natural laws. Gods, after all, have minds of their own, but when Biblical men came to see God as the Creator of all that is, if the whole universe is full of His glory, then he could begin to look for patterns and need no longer feel that nature consists of gods with whom it would be foolhardy to tangle. Nature became an environment to be investigated rather than a pantheon to be placated. Gods cannot be investigated; their actions are autonomous and, therefore, unpredictable; but if nature is distinct from God, is not God but object, then there are patterns in it which the mind can investigate. This shift in perspective set the stage for science. Though the sun's movements are fairly regular, nature also includes seemingly random events - the lightning bolt, floods, hurricanes and typhoons - so it was only natural for people to assume that the gods were as unpredictable and whimsical as they were numerous. Monotheism raised God above nature - "In the beginning God created" - and reduced all other phenomena to natural and,

therefore, explainable phenomena.

- The sun's orbit is fairly regular, but there are eclipses and sun storms. Nature's not fully predictable.

Nor were the pagan gods.

- I still say God is simply our way of explaining the unexplainable.

You're confusing the not-yet-known with the unknowable. Research constantly pushes back the boundary of the not-yet-known, the operation of phenomenon in the physical world, but the enlivening source of it all, God, forever escapes investigation.

I thought the Greeks pioneered science.

Greece produced the first self-conscious science texts, but Israel, some centuries earlier, produced the religious perspective which ultimately made it possible for the ancient world to disentangle nature and the gods. You'll find the world's earliest nature poetry in the Psalms.

- Haven't you strained a bit to answer my question about the benefit, if any, of a monotheistic view?

The idolator feared his gods. He saw himself as helpless before their caprice. According to the Homeric epic, the Trojan war began because the gods argued over who had won a heavenly beauty contest. The popular Gilgamesh epic explains that the flood which destroyed all life on earth was ordered by gods made irritable because a city's noise had disturbed their afternoon siesta. These myths obviously personify the occasional erratic and violent outbursts of natural powers: the eruption of volcanoes, earthquakes, year-long droughts. Given this outlook, pagan wisdom limited itself to counseling people to accept their situation as stoically as they could and pagan worship was organized as a means of pleasing and pacifying the gods by gifts, sacrifices, and elaborate rites. Monotheism markedly reduced the level of people's fear of the gods. The faith that all of nature had been brought into being by a single and purposeful Creator

allowed the community to think of God as dependable and just. Prayer, the praise of God, replaced tribute-paying sacrifices. Where the pagan's relationship to the gods of his city was that of subject to tyrant, he never knew what his gods would do; the Jew's relationship increasingly became that of son to father. God was seen as dependable and a mood of reverence and awe began to replace abject as the dominant mood of the worshipper.

- My bar mitzvah portion consisted of a long diatribe against idolatry which was, as I remember, to be destroyed "root and branch." Yet, worship in The Temple was certainly influenced by paganism. There were sacrifices and priests. Why didn't monotheism make a greater difference?

As a religious institution, the Temple reflected an early and not yet fully developed stage in Israel's understanding of monotheism. It was a magnificent structure which was emotionally important because of its long history as Judaism's central shrine and its association with the promise of redemption. Its forms, priests and sacrifices had been shaped, and to a large degree set, by the Near Eastern environment out of which Judaism emerged, but then the new approach to worship which monotheism made possible - where the most appropriate sacrifice to God was "a humble and contrite heart."

Monotheism made a greater difference?

There were no idols in the Temple. The one god was worshipped there. The older calendar prescribed in the Torah was followed. It was a half-way house and we're much more aware of its continuity with older structures than were the pilgrims who flocked to its courts.

- I remember thinking that those Jews were more than a bit excessive in their attacks on idolatry. After all, they took axes to statues, works of art which museums today would pay millions to own. In any case, no one should go around knocking another's religions.

The idols weren't the problem. It was what the idols represented and the values idolatry encouraged. Idolatry supported social injustice, racism, the arrogance of caste and class, excess of all kind and, as we've seen, a primitive and limiting world view.

- Hard words.

Idolatry supported an outlook which separated man from man, city from city and nation from nation. A community's chief god was usually said to have a particularly clsoe relationship with the royal house, often these nobles claimed semi-divine pedigrees, and they always declared that their god favored laws which sanctified their privileges and their rank. It's only when people see God as one and accept the idea that all other people are also His creatures that a myth like the Adam and Eve story can develop which teaches that all humans come from a single family and that law should treat all classes and nations equally, "even the stranger who is within your gates." Monotheism made possible the concept of humanity.

- You equated idolatry with excess. Be more specific.

In the pagan myths each of the gods was endowed with specific virtues or qualities and, as was only natural, those who worshipped that god were encouraged to emulate those qualities. There was a god of war and a god of love and their devotees tended to consecrate war and love sometimes in ways which were quite amoral. Monotheism, on the other hand, required Jews to balance moral values.

- Come on, many idolators must have been fine people.

The Torah attacks idolatry, not the idolator. In every situation there are people who rise above their environment. My point is not that paganism was black and Judaism white, but that paganism tacitly encouraged racial arrogance and openly encouraged some forms of sexual and moral license and that Judaism did not.

- You've made your point, but I still don't understand why, at thirteen, I had to spend all that time learning to read a diatribe against idolatry. There hasn't been an idolator around for centuries.

Idolatry isn't a dead issue. What about those plastic figures I see on car dashboards? Innocent, maybe, unless the driver is convinced that because they're there he can floor the accelerator pedal without danger. Before you feel too superior remember that we live in the Age of Aquarius.

- You're stretching a point.

I'll admit that idol-making is not a growth industry, but you're wrong, dead wrong, if you believe idolatry is dead. People may no longer worship Osiris or Ishtar but millions worship power or money or fame or love. Idolatry is the worship of any value or power besides God as supreme. Some worship themselves. Some worship a guru or an ideology. Pride of birth and price of place are idols. There is the deity of the white skin and the deity of color. We are scandalized when we read that some ancient peoples offered human sacrifices, but in our time some countries have offered a human holocaust whose victims numbered in the millions.

- What made Jews decide that everyone else was wrong and that God is one?

No one really knows. Some writers point out that the Hebrews were sheep-herding tribes, men who lived in the open land between the Canaanite cities and the desert. Nothing stood between them and the sun, the storm, and the wilderness. Presumedly, living with the sweep of nature sensitized them to the unity behind all discrete phenomena.

- Other bedouin tribes remained pagan.

Yes, and for that reason there are other explanations. One assumes that the Hebrews, as desert folk who lived on the edge of civilization, watched with detached amusement the habits of city folk. One city-state would conquer another only to be conquered by a third, and after each victory the winner would demote his enemy's gods and elevate their own. According to this theory, our fathers were

simple and clear-eyed enough to see the folly of all this and wisely concluded that there must be a single power behind or above all these lesser powers.

- Again, why did only the Israelites, among the bedouin tribes, get this brainstorm?

One theory has it that the Hebrews learned monotheism from the Egyptians. The Exodus story cannot be precisely dated, but it seems to place the Israelites in Egypt during a period when Pharoah Akhenaton set out to destroy the power of the priestly elite by denouncing all the gods they served but one, the solar disk, Aton. This theory holds that Moses watched these events and saw the value of Akhenaton's idea and when he was able, dedicated his people to a single god: all-powerful, all-embracing, One. I'll make the arguments against this theory for you. While we are fairly certain of Akhenaton's motives, like Henry VIII he needed the cash and monastery himself and to consolidate his own power he was determined to deprive the priests of their feudal power base. What we don't know is whether he denied other gods or simply demoted them, that is, if he was aware of or cared about the theological implications of his short-lived drive for absolute power. Most historians believe that theological issues were quite secondary.

- What's your theory?

I go with the Bible - revelation. Someone sensed a commanding voice speaking to him, that is, he reached out with his mind into the darkness and wrenched from the darkness the vision of oneness. Science did not demand the idea of the One, indeed, the science of the day seemed to argue against it; but somehow, someone reached out and understood and made others understand.

- You don't actually believe that God spoke to Moses?

I believe that Moses or another outgrew his world's conventions and that a new understanding of the creative and mysterious reality behind the world of things and appearances began to take shape in his mind. You should know by now

How can we be certain then that this description is accurate and that these qualities are appropriate to His nature?

Here we take our leap of faith. There's no absolute proof. When I need proof of the Torah's claims, I satisfy myself by looking at the grace which Israel has enjoyed because of its acceptance of this myth and this message. We've been a better people because we were taught that God clothed the nakedness of Adam and Eve; visited Abraham while he was recovering from surgery; comforted Isaac after the death of his father; and at the Burning Bush reminded Moses of his duty, and frequently admonished: "After the Lord your God shall you walk."

- You can't mean that literally.

I don't, and neither did the rabbis, but in this way they made it clear that moral concerns are central in God's nature and must be centered in our lives. To Jews God was not pure power or pure being but the moral essence within all that is, the guarantor of life's meaning and a God who was to be emulated as well as pbeued/

- I wish I could believe all that.

It was time for the service. Let's see how it feels and later talk more about all this. The group slowly broke up.

that I believe in a responsive universe and in radical surprise, which is what I believe is meant by revelation. Certainly, our minds operate along many channels besides those of logic and reason.

- Ideas don't appear out of nowhere. Patient research always precedes a breakthrough formulation. All ideas have a history.

So did theism. Long before Moses there were tribes in the Middle East who worshipped a high god who was more important to them than the other gods. Popular myths circulated about a creator god and other peoples believed in revelation and prophecy. Some of the bricks were at hand, ready to be used. The intellectual leap Israel made was to deny that the lesser gods in fact were gods and to see that God was above nature, not nature itself.

- Can God also be an idol?

Many use Him that way, an idol represents certainty, truth becomes manifest, and there are those who make God confirm their prejudices and justify their privileges. The truth about God which Judaism emphasizes but which all too few really think about is that when all is said and done, despite revelation, much about God remains a mystery, and so whatever we say about God and His will should be said a bit tentatively - at least, with humility.

- And when my grandfather would finally get tired of all my 'whys' he'd close me down by saying, 'only God knows.'

- If God is mystery how can there be a message?

We confront the mystery and make of it what we can. For Jews the prototypical and controlling myth is Sinai. Moses could not see God, but God passed behind him as he stood in the cleft of the rock and he sensed something of God's nature. "The Lord, the Lord God is merciful and gracious, long-suffering and abundant in goodness and ever true, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity, transgression and sin."

mandate for social justice which was developed by the Hebrew prophets. That's quite a list.

- And no one thanks us for our efforts.

More often than not, the powers that be fought these ideas. Kings claimed the right to rule as they saw fit, but our tradition rejects all claims to absolute authority. Priests and popes believed they controlled the keys to Heaven, but Jews acted as if they knew that they'd be let in anyway. Monks denied their libidos, believing God valued a life of austerity and celibacy, while rabbis married and raised families, suggesting in doing so that the way of celibacy might not be all that dear to God. Whether we've meant to be or not, we've been a highly visible, if silent, reproach to the majority's most cherished beliefs. At one point the medieval church actually locked up the Hebrew Bible, fearing that Christians might read it and question official doctrine.

- No one likes a non-conformist.

- Or competition.

- I've often thought anti-semitism represents a perverse tribute to the importance of Judaism. If you don't like the message, blame the messenger. I remember reading that as Czarist Russia teetered towards revolution, the royal ministers talked candidly with outsiders about their decision to expel all Jews. They pictured the Jews as Typhoid Marys who spread ideas which were subversive to the spiritual health of the Russian people.

- Like democracy and social justice.

One of the reasons the privileged classes of Europe promoted anti-semitism was a feeling that by damning and labeling all liberal ideas Jewish, they would discourage their nationals from thinking seriously about the programs of social, economic and political reform.

- Amos and Isaiah are in their Bible as well as in ours.

And there were always churchmen who read these texts seriously; but most of them read the Old Testament from the perspective of Christian doctrine which

Chapter 9

THE GOD WHO LETS US CRY

The service had been a warm moment. A few of us had retired to one of the bunks with coffee and doughnuts. For some reason I was reminiscing about a recent trip to China.

In spite of the dramatic political changes, China exhudes a feeling of cultural continuity and the Chinese know what it feels like to be rooted in a long-lived tradition. They're much like us in that respect. As a Jew one of the feelings I most enjoy is that I am part of a truly significant enterprise which began in remote antiquity and will outlive me.

- With all due respect, rabbi, you're deluding yourself showing your parochialism. I, too, grew up feeling Jews had made truly critical contributions to civilization and, to my surprise, I found we were hardly mentioned in the history survey course I took my freshman year in college. We had one lecture on the Israelites and the Hebrew Bible in which the prof talked about the Bible's originality but made it clear that the Bible's importance to Western civilization was due largely to Christianity's later interest in it. For the rest of the year neither the Jewish people nor any Jewish contributions to civilization were mentioned until the second last week when he talked for a few minutes about the Jews' marginal role in the development of today's financial systems.

Your prof was the parochial scholar. I suggested this morning that Judaism gave the world the concept of humanity and the mindset which permitted science to develop, not to mention our modern notions of what are appropriate forms of worship. We also helped the world develop a reverence for law and a remarkably sound concept of morality. During the Middle Ages Jews introduced Greek and Islamic philosophy and medicine as well as the modern banking practice to Europe, and many of the most important political reforms of our day are rooted in the

- You don't have to be a Christian to be an anti-semite. During the 60's I belonged to SDS. I broke with my friends, less over their radical politics than over their anti-semitism. In many of their speeches Jew was a synonym for slum landlord and "Zionist imperialism", a synonym for colonialism and Western influence in the Third World.

Revolutionaries, like reactionaries, need scapegoats and because they usually have few scruples how they achieve their goals, they'll come down on any useful target.

- Anti-semitism is directed against Jews, not Judaism.

Few people bother with that fine distinction. I suspect most anti-semites assume that we are what they say we are because our religious training has made us so. Our language here is revealing. To Jew is to be a sharpy. To be a Christian is, in their vocabulary, the highest moral praise.

- Most hatreds weaken over time. Anti-semitism hasn't. Why not?

Millions accept the New Testament as God's word and so the offending portions cannot be excised. Culture changes slowly and the devil myths linger on.

- We're an achievement-oriented community who are eager and able to take advantage of opportunity. Our tradition of literacy made us potentially even dangerous competitors during all the generations when most of Europe was illiterate.

- You're blaming "them." We were not innocent victims. Jews were usurers and money lenders.

Ask yourself why. Until modern times in Europe we couldn't own or farm land, join the guilds or practice any of the crafts. All we were allowed to do was peddle and money-lend, do the necessary but dirty work that others would not deign to touch.

- Anti-semitism is their problem. My problem is whether given its existence

emphasized salvation through faith and came down heavily on private virtue rather than equality and justice.

- Anti-semitism wasn't restricted to the privileged. My grandfather was beaten up by Polish peasants.

Europe learned anti-semitism from the church. It's the West's oldest and most sustained form of racism and the only one which has had overt religious sanction. The New Testament says some harsh things about Jews. In the gospels, as you know, Jews are given lines in which they clamor for Jesus' death. Paul, in his letters, stereotyped Judaism as a dry and lifeless legalism and denounced Jewish leaders as pious hypocrites and narrow-minded priests. By making Jews rather than the Romans responsible for the crucifixion, the New Testament was written for a Roman-dominated world, the early Christians made their scripture palatable to the authorities.

- You're making it sound like a conspiracy.

In a sense it was. Christianity wanted to gain acceptance by the Romans and to be seen as separate from the Jews who twice rebelled against Rome during the first century of the church's existence. Since Jesus and most of his early disciples had been Jews, those who edited the New Testament felt the need to prove that they weren't another Jewish sect. What better way to separate themselves from the Jews than to cast the Jews as the killers of the Christ they followed?

- The attack didn't stop with a rewriting of the trial scene.

Some Church Fathers developed what Jules Isaac has called a theology of contempt, whose basic thesis was that God Himself had ordered that the Temple be destroyed and had sentenced the Jewish people to eternal wandering to punish them for their complicity in deicide. This became conventional church teaching and generations of Christians were taught that they were carrying out God's will when they forced the Jew to wear demeaning costume, denied him standing in law, and set up rigit rules of apartheid to separate the pariah from the Christian.

the cost of loyalty comes too high. We've been the West's favorite whipping boy, and if every group protecting its turf and self-esteem is going to abuse us, I want to ask the question whether loyalty which costs us so much pain is worth the price.

Jewish history is not an unrelieved horror story. During the Biblical period the Jewish experience was not particularly bitter and in the diaspora we have enjoyed extended periods of relatively peaceful settlement. We're in one of those now in America.

- We've had more than our share of pain.

How do you determine what a group's fair share of pain is?

- We've been the world's number one victim.

The Armenians, the Kurds, the Irish, the Cambodians, the blacks, central Africa, the American Indians, would give you an argument. The world is not a kindly place. A few are born to luxury. Millions are born into the poverty of wretched places like Bangladesh.

- You'll agree history has not been kind to us.

I won't argue the point, but perhaps we ought to ask whether we should bless or blame God for our history.

Bless God?

I'm convinced that many of the best qualities which the Jewish community evidences - compassion, empathy, a pragmatic attitude towards success, open-handed generosity, impatience with privilege - are as much the result of bitter experience as of moral teaching. The powerless know what it means to be exposed - human.

- Come off it. A Jew owned the East Side sweat shop where my grandfather slaved when he came to this country.

Obviously, not all Jews are sensitive or charitable or committed to social justice, but a remarkable number were and are. Liberal candidates tend to get the Jewish vote. The ghetto was a dismal place whose high walls rarely let in the

sunlight, but within this cramped arena Jews constructed a remarkably compassionate community; in effect, a welfare state whose voluntary societies provided dowries for poor girls, travel money for the stranded, medicine for the sick, tuition for those requiring scholarship aid as well as direct and discrete financial assistance for the poor.

- We're off the track again. My question is whether our survival is worth the cost: yellow badges, pogroms, Stalin, Hitler, and the Arabs' nearly fourty-year war against Israel. Why continue an identity which obviously angers or frightens so many?

- I'm stubborn. I won't even let bullies have their way.

Some twenty-five hundred years ago an anonymous thinker-prophet whose work survives because it was stitched on to the scroll of Isaiah, lived in a community of Judean exiles, detained by the Babylonians hundreds of miles from Jerusalem. He asked your question: whether it was worth the effort to keep the faith. Would the world be any the worse if the Jews simply disappeared?

- And?

Survival, he said, was an obligation. Jews were God's servants and have a special responsibility to proclaim, by example and by word, God's Instructions to peoples accustomed to idolatry and pagan values. He recognized even then the dangers implicit in this task. If Israel is to be the conscience of the world, Israel can expect to be "God's suffering servant, despised, forsaken of man, a people of pain from whom others hid their faces."

- So why do it?

- It was a job which had to be done. We live, at least I hope we live, for civilization, not just for ourselves.

- But is our cause worth the pain?

Obviously, I think it is for all the reasons we've been talking about. I also believe that a person with a mission is happier than one without since he's spared the sense of ennui. His life has meaning.

- But what if no one bothers to listen? I gave several years of my life to the peace movement and we're right back in the soup in Latin America.

But we're out of Vietnam. The thing is to keep chipping away. I often remind myself of a Talmudic adage "yours not to complete the work, neither are you free to desist from it." Moses led the tribes to the Jordan but was not allowed to cross into the Promised Land.

- And Joshua crossed the Jordan. What bothers me is that Judaism's message doesn't seem to be getting across. The world certainly is not beating its swords into plough shares. Poverty, tyranny, and violence are everywhere.

We've got problems, but there's been progress. Slavery has been abolished. Serfdom has all but disappeared. Racism is on the defensive. Birth and blood don't count for much anymore. There isn't a country in the world where universal literacy isn't a national goal. God told us to choose life and all around the world the masses seem to be doing so.

- And the messenger is still getting it in the neck. I've lived through Auschwitz, four Arab wars against Israel, the Soviet campaign against Jews. Anti-semitic attacks are becoming more frequent in Europe, and Israel is frequently the favorite target of the world's frustrated emotions.

- I agree. Anti-semitism is their problem, not ours. We can't do much about it, but anti-semitism raises for me the basic question about God. Germans built Auschwitz, but God didn't stop the Holocaust. I don't understand a God who would let millions die. After Auschwitz I find it blasphemous to talk about a God who is merciful and gracious, the kind of God the prayer book talks about.

- I can't believe you said that.

- Would you want to live as the animals do, without freedom, as a prisoner of instinct? God cared enough to endow us with consciousness and you can't have freedom without running the risk that our actions may be terribly wrong and cause terrible hurt. Germany didn't have to proclaim Hitler Fuehrer. Russia's revolution didn't have to end in Bolshevik absolution. God has not failed us. We fail

God. At creation God gave us all we needed - a good earth, judgment, and the possibility of taking our lives in hand - a fair judgment would have to be that and we've rather botched the job.

- The innocent died. Many of those who supported Hitler survived and prospered in post-war Germany. You speak of justice. I see no justice here.

- The Allies won. Hitler died in the Bunker.

- Only after twenty-five million others had been killed.

You've raised the crucial issue of faith for Jews. The rabbis defined atheism not as a denial of God but as a denial of God's justice. God's providence, the fairness of life, is the lynch pin of faith precisely because it demands that we affirm an idea which seems to be denied by experience.

- Then I'm an atheist.

Issues of faith cannot be answered. They can only be wrestled with. It's to our tradition's credit that it has not to deny this problem of justice. It's Job's problem. Life isn't fair. Babies die. Bastards thrive.

Our fathers believed that the Red Sea had parted and that the tribes had crossed dry shod. The unexpected does sometime happen, but they also taught that no one should depend on a miracle. A Talmudic sage said: the earning of bread is a greater wonder than redemption, for redemption requires an angel, an agent, and the earning of bread is done by man with the skills God gave him.

- Do you believe in miracles?

Not in any literal sense. I believe the unexpected sometimes happens. I take the Biblical miracles as imaginative statements of our faith in life's promisie and as colorful metaphors for the relief of a people who faced danger and then are spared. They suggest to me the response of wonder and awe with which religious people accept life's unexpected possibilities.

- Can I expect God to care about my needs - about me?

Just calling on God, believing, often gives us added strength, just the boost we need.

- That's an evasion.

Not really. It's important to know that we're not prisoners of fate. A medieval teacher, Nachmanides, put it this way: "There is no such thing as the natural course of events. All things and all events in the life of a person or of society are miracles." I affirm possibility.

- But not that God will answer my prayers.

We've talked about prayer. For me the fact that we can pray, gain release and new strength, is a sufficient miracle. Think what hell life would be if we had to keep all our feelings bottled up.

- Where did the thesis that life must work out fairly come from?

It's one of the revolutionary claims advanced by Jews in Biblical times. The pagan gods, then the human beings, high-handedly, God's treatment, the Torah claim is just. According to the Torah view, at Sinai we entered into a covenant with God and agreed to its conditions, including a list of rewards for obedience and punishments for default. The principle "as you sow so shall you reap" underlies the Biblical approach where it is assumed that God organized things so that we would be properly rewarded or punished for our actions.

- But that's not so. Covenant thinking played a major, and largely constructive, role in the development of Jewish self-consciousness. A God who cares little about what we do, who will not punish us for sin or reward us for obedience, imposes no moral obligations. He's simply there, a convenient explanation of the natural world. When God guarantees the basic equity of life then everything we do counts and we had better do it right. Covenant thinking about divine justice provided the ideas which fueled the prophet's morally bracing sermons, but like some modern drugs, the thesis of God's justice had some unexpected and unwanted side effects. The literal-minded wanted to see righteousness not rewarded and every sin punished and had their own ideas how this could be done, and many others applied this idea broadside and insisted that illness, natural disaster,

and death were always the result of some sin against the covenant.

- That's nonsense. A baby doesn't deserve to die. India's poor don't deserve their poverty. The rich don't deserve their wealth. Viruses and bacteria cause disease. The shifting of the plates which form the crust of the earth cause earthquakes.

It may be nonsense, but it's a very human form of nonsense. Often, when I make a condolence call, the widow will say: 'what did I do to deserve this?' We think from inside out and find it hard to imagine that we're not somehow responsible for all that happens to us.

- So how does Judaism get out from under the patent absurdity of picturing life as a kindergarten class where you get a gold star for being good and a talking to when you're not?

The sages insisted that we were not the best judges of what is fair and just, we don't have sufficient perspective, God's ways are beyond our understanding, and they inconsistently allowed what we call luck, the accidental, to play a role.

- That's rationalizing.

In part, what they were saying is that if we take a long view there does seem to be something of a balancing out. Israel still lives, and the empires which treated us badly have long since disappeared. If I abuse my body I'll pay a price. A nation that plays the power game at some point will discover that it's no game. It works the other way, too. There are intangible rewards. I feel better than usual when I manage to be helpful to someone in the course of a day. "The reward of the good deed is the deed itself."

- You sound like one of Job's comforters. I thought he pretty well destroyed all their arguments.

Job accused them of arrogance because they claimed to understand God's reward system, a task he felt beyond human capacity. He also insisted that their arguments were not relevant to his situation. He was hurt and pain is

utterly personal, an intense feeling which no argument can relieve. Over time the tyrant may get his just deserts, but many of his victims are already dead. The comforters claimed too much, but the Book wouldn't be the gripping piece it is if much of what they said was not worth thinking about.

- For instance.

They argued that suffering may be good for the soul, that through storms we grow, and up to a point that's true. I knew an intensely self-involved couple, born to wealth, who lived an incredibly carefree life. They suffered their first "misfortune" when their only daughter developed a rare and dangerous blood disease, and in caring for her they were drawn out of their cocoon into the real world where people are exposed and are hurt and, over time, they became caring people who devoted money and, more importantly, time to the support of pediatric medicine. Again and again I've seen grief and pain release latent capacities for empathy.

- God must be something of a sadist if he needs to hurt us to help us.

Why do you say that? A parent punishes the child he loves when there's no other way to teach him an important lesson.

In what we call the real world the sensitive who don't need any lessons in empathy seem to get hurt more often than the thick-skinned who do.

You're probably right, but then those who build a hard shell around their feelings will never know some of life's deepest satisfactions: love, empathy, a sense of being fully involved in another one's community.

- You spoke of Sinai and covenant and retribution as important parts of the message of Biblical Judaism. How then did a book like Job, which challenges these affirmations, get to be included in the Bible?

Yes, but not the covenant. Job doesn't deny God's Instructions. He claims innocence on the grounds that he has obeyed all that the covenant demands.

What he deines is the tie between the commandments and the promised reward system.

- And?

And when Job holds fast to his claim of integrity, the book ends without any direct answer to Job's challenge. What we have instead is a final proclamation by God of His power and majesty. God parades the vast and mysterious operation of His creation, turns to Job and asks, "Where were you when I rolled out the Heavens?"

- How is that an answer?

God sees Job saying that Job, who sees justice only in the narrowest perspective, how it affects us and those we know. Being human, not divine, we cannot understand God's decision. God's justice operates on a scale in which our particular needs and individual fate are not the ultimate criteria. Take death. Few welcome death, but unless we die there will be no room for our children and grandchildren.

- That's a copout.

Perhaps. But Job submits, "I know that You can do anything. . .I had heard of You with the hearing of the ear, but now my eyes see You. Therefore, I abhor my words and repent. . ." If I understand Job he is saying, you're right, I can't work it all out. But you've made me sense the sweep, power and orderliness of the universe, and I'll hold my tongue. I won't protest anymore.

- If Job had said, I still don't understand, I'd have understood. The universe is vast and creation is a mystery, but he says, "I repent." Obviously, he accepts God's justice. I don't see why he should. He'd been stripped of everything he had or cared about.

Job's response is now one of faith in a God who is the creative power responsible for the mysterious and wonderful order of nature and he's willing to set aside his own. I've often tried to understand some of the events of my life and failed, but found that in time my questions lost their urgency as I opened myself up to the starry sky, the restless ocean, and the miracle of life, I have sensed a wisdom which I can only call divine, just.

- I wouldn't trade my wife and children for all the beautiful sunsets in the world.

It's not a matter of logic but of faith. My congregation includes a number of Holocaust survivors whose faith remarkably is unshaken and a number of people who lived comfortably in America during those terrible years and now they say that after Auschwitz they can no longer believe. There are people who endure terrible tragedy, yet seem to be able to see beyond their pain and to keep hold of a perspective about a world of meaning and purpose which gives them the strength to carry on. Somewhat to my surprise, I've discovered that tragedy rarely destroys faith. The human spirit is remarkably resilient. In fact, in many ways faith suffers more from satisfaction and security than from suffering.

- All your explanations can't paper over the fact that millions pray for relief and none arrives. God does not intervene.

I can only repeat that if our situation is to include freedom, then it must include the possibility of man-made evil as well as of moral heroism. Do you remember the story I told several sessions back about Moses visiting the Academy of Akiba and being astonished at the rules Akiba quoted as the law of Moses? I didn't complete the story as the Talmud reports it. After God had reassured Moses that what Akiba was teaching was, in fact, Torah¶ Moses says to God: 'If you knew that a sage of his stature would arise why did you give the Torah through me?' He should have been your prophet.' To which God answered, 'Be silent, such is My decree.' God then allowed Moses to see the rest of Akiba's life. Akiba, as an old man, played a leading role in the Bar Kochba Rebellion against Rome and was arrested and flayed alive. Moses was appalled: 'Is this the reward for such learning and devotion?' Be silent for such is My decree.'

- I'm appalled.

Contrary to the faiths which emphasize only God's tender mercies, Judaism

accepts the idea that God's plans may require that some suffer. Though we would like to believe it, commitment and decency aren't always rewarded.

- You can't leave it there.

Akiba's martyrdom inspired generations of men and women to risk their lives for Judaism's special message.

- That's not enough.

Perhaps we're not meant to understand. When I'm hurt and my heart aches, sweet reason is not the medicine I need. Explanations seem irrelevant. Pushed to the wall, we draw the strength to persevere from a deeper source than reason.

- How do you know?

I've seen it happen time and again. As a young rabbi, I expected to hear those in pain cry out in anger and deny God. Thirty years later I know that it rarely happens that way. I have heard complaints, certainly, and self-pity, 'why me;' but I have rarely known anyone whose faith was shattered by illness, bad luck, or pain. Somehow, when we are pushed to the limit, when there's no place to look but up, the life force takes over; and more often than not, what I hear is a half-whispered, half-believed 'maybe it's for the best.'

- That's a rationalization.

Perhaps.

- My mother's dying of cancer. She's been remarkably brave and she hasn't blamed God, but she's going to die.

- In dignity.

- Let's hope.

At least she hasn't been diminished by fear. It's strange, but true, that many who know that their fate is not what they would want, triumph over self-pity, and find the strength to accept and continue to grow and expose latent strengths. What matters most at such a time is the attitude we take towards what has happened to us.

- You said earlier that the rabbis weren't stoics and now you're saying, make the best of a bad bargain. That's what stoicism is all about.

The stoic is resigned. The rabbis seek to affirm. They spoke of growth and courage. Faith cannot promise happiness, but it can help us seek out the possibility of each day and the promise of each part of our life. There can be profound satisfaction in knowing that life has not overwhelmed us, but to me what you call faith is no more than a stubborn denial of the facts. I don't see any evidence that life exhibits what we're calling justice.

Look closer, the body's a marvel. Consciousness is a wonder. Our emotions and talents are miraculous capacities.

- Our capacities are no proof of God's justice. Often the more we feel, the more we can be hurt.

Were it not for love, empathy and the aesthetic sense, life would be dismal beyond belief. Our feelings, or rather our ability to feel, suggests that God cars about what we call today the quality of life.

- I still don't see justice out there.

Our planet has everything human beings need to construct a satisfying life.

- Why don't I sense the promise you obviously feel?

It's a matter of perspective. Some of us get so caught up with our own problems and wants - and we never have all we want - that we can't see the blessings we have or the potentialities that are there. It's possible to be so preoccupied that we fail to recognize the holiness hidden within what seems to be happenstance. Much of our hurt, our feeling that life is a pointless endurance contest, comes from our failure to enjoy what can be enjoyed and from our failure to develop and use wisely our God-given talents.

- You wear rose-colored glasses. What about nuclear missiles on their pads, the world stuffed with sophisticated arms and everyone trying to do his neighbor in?

What about the millions who have been liberated from ignorance, poverty and exploitation? Many of today/s bloody headlines are indications that the old order based on class and economic privilege is on the way out. Few give up privilege easily. The sages often described the period immediately preceding the Messianic Age with the metaphor of the delivery of a child. Just as birth is preceded by painful contractions, so the peaceful kingdom would be preceded by a time of unprecedented trouble.

- How do you know that our troubles aren't simply the prelude to worse troubles?

I don't. My feelings are based partly in what I see happening in the world and partly in faith. Faith is a reflex of humanity's stubborn optimism.

Stubbornness isn't necessarily a virtue, mules are stubborn.

A steady optimism is. Without hope the soul shrivels and we give up trying to make the world a better place. Hope is the foundation stone of sanity and the catalyst.

- You're saying close your eyes to what life's really like.

Not at all. I'm advocating far-sightedness, clear eyes which can locate the holiness of life as well as its strains. I'm encouraged by the sense of concern I find in so many people and by what I know of history. Over the centuries, civilization has emerged because of the efforts of those who had hope. I'm trying to get you to see what is always there but which we rarely notice: love, kindness, moral conviction, confidence that we can make our world livable. My faith is renewed whenever I come across an act of disinterested goodness or suddenly respond to the wonder of life. You approach Yad v'shem in Jerusalem, the Museum which is a memorial to the victims of the Holocaust, along a walk lined with, trees. Each planting is dedicated to a non-Jew who risked his or her life and probably his whole family to save Jews. Auschwitz is only part of reality. Here is another, one we often forget.

You don't have to have faith in God to hold yourself together. After he

was bar mitzvahed my socialist grandfather fled Poland, put that life behind him and never went near a synagogue. He died an old and sick man, but with his dignity intact.

He must have had a strong faith in life, in many ways the very faith Judaism encourages. There are people of faith inside and outside the churches and synagogues. Faith is simply another word for an attitude which affirms life's potential by actively seeking it out. That's why before death the dying were encouraged to speak the Shema and after death the mourners recite the Kaddish. Neither prayer mentions death. Each affirms life and God and looks forward to the coming of the Messianic Kingdom. It's a way of reminding us that "Weeping may tarry for the night, but joy comes with the dawn." We're a messianic religion.

- Aren't all religions?

Buddhism trains its followers not to care, not to expect that human society can be reformed, on the theory that suffering comes from wanting things and expecting too much. Judaism teaches that in measure as we care about others, our families and community, we fulfill ourselves, and that justice can be established in the gates . Adversity and evil are not denied, but they do not represent the whole of life and we should not be afraid to plunge into life or to open ourselves to others. We are commanded to "choose life."

- I hear you and I'm not satisfied.

I'm not surprised. You want answers and you're asking questions which only God can answer.

- I thought the Torah provided answers.

The rabbis have an explanation of why the first word in the Torah begins with the second letter of the Hebrew alphabet, Bet, rather than the first, the Aleph. Bet is formed by three straight strokes which enclose three sides of a square. The missing side opens towards the flow of the text. The Bet, they said,

was chosen as a sign that the Jew should read carefully what follows, the Torah, and not worry too much about what cannot be known: what is above, what below, and what preceded creation. The Torah offers us a vision; a faith; practical encouragement; a religious discipline, rituals that can help us hold on to sanity when the pressures mount; but not a full explanation of life. There are mysteries we will never penetrate. In other words, don't beat your head against an unyielding will. You'll get nowhere and only give yourself a headache.

- I don't like not knowing.

So what do you propose?

We broke on the silence that followed.

Chapter 10

THE GENERATION GAP, GUILT AND GOD

Shabbat afternoon. The morning service had been informal. There was a feeling of community and contentment.

- I like services here. There's no dressing up. I like to sing. There's a feeling, a warm feeling. I don't like services at home. The pews are uncomfortable, the service is a set piece, everyone's dressed up and uptight.

Here you're tuned in. You came to the service after three days of talking and thinking about Judaism. At home you walk in cold. You're not in a service mood. The difference is as much in you as in the service.

- It's also the guitar and my open shirt. I don't like put-on. I'm sure God doesn't care if I'm in a coat and tie.

Dressing up is one way of getting into a particular mood. A coat and tie are a conventional sign of respect, that what we're about is significant.

- Dress doesn't mean much anymore. We dress down, not up.

You wouldn't go to a White House dinner in your camp shirt; but, basically, you're right, getting dressed up no longer means as much as it used to. In the old world putting your Sabbath suit on, probably your only suit, marked the Sabbath as a special occasion. No longer. Many of us wear and coat and tie every day to the office. Clothes no longer give off clear signals.

- I don't like an organ. It's too austere an instrument. We'd do better with a guitar.

You'd soon tire of it. It's fine for a sing-along, but it doesn't have the range or majesty for the High Holidays.

- My grandfather was of the old shul. We belong to a Reform synagogue and when he comes to services with us he always complains that the organ belongs in a church.

- That's where it came from.

What's wrong with that? Organs aren't baptized. We borrowed the organ from the church centuries after they borrowed the Gregorian chant from us. In religion everyone copycats a bit.

- Pops said that his shul didn't have an organ as a sign of mourning for the Temple in Jerusalem.

He told you right. The Temple had an orchestra and when it was destroyed the synagogue prohibited all musical instruments as a sign that we'd lost the glory of The Temple.

- You'd change all that.

We have, as you know. The river flows on and there's a point when looking back is no longer helpful. Many of us want and need a richer musical setting for our worship than the unaccompanied voice can provide. Besides, while we're sorry the Temple was destroyed, in terms of the dynamics of Jewish life it's a good thing that it happened. I'd hate to think of twentiety-century Judaism still based on shrines served by hereditary priests conducting animal sacrifices.

- An organ-accompanied service can be flat.

A service is what the congregation makes it and what they bring to it. It's the same with a play. A cold audience can destroy our pleasure in a great production of Hamlet. The analogy to a play, by the way, in some respects is a useful one. The prayer book is in the script, but every congregation, like every director, makes a number of additions and deletions and sets the play differently. The hall makes a difference, so does the musical setting. The biggest difference, of course, is the congregation. Some come to criticize, others to participate.

- Cultural differences also make a difference. In Israel I visited a Bokharan synagogue and though the text was familiar I felt like a complete outsider.

Yemenite Jews sat cross-legged on prayer rugs like their Muslim neighbors while Polish Jews, like their Christian neighbors, prayed standing before tall reading desks. Services reflect the environment.

- And the congregation. At home we have two services on Friday nights: an adult and a youth group service, and it's hard to believe that they're organized by people from the same community.

In a sense they're not. Today, for the first time in history, kids and their parents spend most of their time in distinct and separate cultures and, understandably, develop quite different sensibilities and tastes. Young people want dialogue, not a sermon; rock not Bach; movement rather than calm and decorum.

- Families should worship together.

- There are times to be together and times to be apart.

- We all enjoyed this morning's service.

There are no teen-agers or octgenarians in camp.

- Also no one who can't worship without a coat and tie.

- Don't laugh, but what I liked best about this morning was that there were no ushers. At home they patrol the aisles and I always feel I'm being watched and treated as a child.

- I'm a convert. I like our service but never have gotten over my surprise at the hubbub. Some never stop talking to each other. Others visit when they come in late. My parents' church was always hushed. People stayed in their pews. I asked our rabbi about it and all he said was, 'democracy is noisy.'

- Why the noise and moving about?

The traditional service is excessively long - too long to sustain intensity of feeling.

Why? During the Middle Ages Jews had no other diversions. The synagogue was their theater and meeting place as well as their sanctuary.

- On Friday night my synagogue is like a three-ring circus. The cantor, the prayer book, the reading of the Torah, and the rabbi's sermon are in the sanctuary, the center ring. The youth group, a guitar, folk music, a mimeographed service and a friendship circle fill the chapel and the assembly hall is full of wriggling children and beaming parents who have come together for simple songs, cut-down prayers and a story sermon.

Does this bother you?

- Yes. It's all quite lively, but it lacks holiness, "Know before whom you stand," is inscribed over our ark. After one particularly noisy evening I suggested that we amend it to read: "Know before whom you schmoos."

- It's fun just to be together.

- That's why we have an oneg - but after services, at services, I want a chance to be alone with my thoughts.

In our services a Jew can be alone with God provided there are at least nine other there with him.

- I spent a semester at King's College in Cambridge. The college had a chapel and regularly celebrated Evensong. It's a quiet and candlelit moment. The Gothic arches and the shadows blend beautifully with the hymns. Though I was an outsider, there were times when I experienced quite powerfully life's mysterious holiness.

The church celebrates mystery and does it well. The synagogue is an open space with few depths or shadows. It accepts mystery but does not celebrate it.

When I visited a professor friend at King's College he took me to Evensong and, I, too, was moved, but I also noticed that the fellows and students were in an inner space behind a screen and I was on the other side with the commoners. The chapel affirmed aristocracy, not democracy.

- Our buildings seem to have no particular shape. Apparently we didn't use architecture the way Christians do. Many churches are built in the form of a cross and in themselves a sign of the Christian message.

Our message is expressed in the scrolls, not in the structure, and the message is specific, not just symbolic. But there's still a sense of holiness there. When a Jew crossed in front of the Ark he bowed to it. The scrolls somehow reflect the presence of God. The rabbis deliberately ordered that a curtain, the parochet, hang before the Ark to suggest the curtain which hung in front of the Holy of Holies in the Jerusalem Temple which symbolically protected the worshipper from the radiance of God and proclaimed that there was something of God within.

Our curtain's a perforated metal screen. I never have given it a second thought.

Unfortunately, we tend to treat symbols offhandedly. We commission an artist to "do" an ark but never tell him what message it should suggest. He treats it simply as a focal point in an auditorium. It's too bad because awe and reverence heighten our expectations of a service and, therefore, increase its impact on us. Not so long ago when a Jew dropped a prayer book he kissed it as he picked it up. Now he simply complains that it's too bulky.

I always feel awkward when I'm at a service where people reach out with their prayer shawls to touch the Torah as it's being processed. I couldn't bring myself to do it.

Once familiar acts of reverence fall out of style, but every service ought to include some reverential rule which tells us we've affirmed our faith.

- A few months ago our youth group worked up a creative service using some poems by Bob Dylan and Kahlil Gibran. It was moving, but the rabbi had a fit.

I'm sure he was bothered by its signals.

- I don't follow you.

One of worship's primary functions is to reinforce the religion's teachings.

Your youth group produced an emotional experience, perhaps even a spiritual experience, but not a Jewish experience.

- We said the Shema.

Six Hebrew words can get lost in an hour of Gibran and Dylan.

- Why must a service be Jewish? If I need to I can pray anywhere, anytime, and when I do I'm sure God doesn't care whether I say my piece in Hebrew or English.

I'm saying worship and you're hearing prayer. Prayer is an unscheduled expression of deep feeling. In our worship God, Torah, speaks to us. In prayer we speak to God. A Jewish service is not intended as a prayer meeting.

- Obviously, we need to define terms.

I equate prayer with the sudden surge of emotion which comes over me when I am pushed beyond my resources, beaten down by life, or unable to contain my joy. I prayed when my father was deathly ill. I prayed when each of my children was born. Those prayers were spoken late at night in a hospital corridor and not in a synagogue. Of course, there have been times when I have prayed during a worship service. I came troubled. The music calmed my spirits and the sense of community, the quiet, an awareness of the presence of God unlocked my heart, but I can number these moments and my point is simply that prayer cannot be scheduled.

Worship is scheduled, congregational, and largely scripted. Those who say, 'I do not need a book to pray,' are absolutely right. Worship is an orchestrated experience, not a happening. Worship tends to lift us from the workaday world into the Torah world so we can breathe for a few moments the pure air of the Jewish vision and live for an hour or so under the spell of the Jewish tradition. When you open the Siddur you find praise, doctrine, paragraphs from the literature, Psalms and memorial prayers, a distillation of the central themes of our special message. Worship is visibly and instructively Jewish. The Torah is read. A sermon is preached. Candles are lit. The Kaddish is recited.

- When I go I'm given a book, told to open to such and such a page and follow along. I'm told by hand signals when to stand and when to sit. I always feel I'm being directed by someone else and that I can't just be myself.

Don't challenge a service, let it flow over you.

- Say what you will, services are artificial.

Yes, in the sense that all civilization is artificial; that is, a creation of human design. Prayer is spontaneous, we pray as the spirit moves us, and being artless, prayer can be foolish, petty, misdirected or self-deluding. Spontaneity isn't the ultimate virtue.

- At least prayer is genuine.

And egotistic. Prayer speaks of need, my needs. I'm the center of my prayers. Prayer doesn't enlarge my horizons. Worship's scripted and the Siddur presents readings which reflect the wisdom of a spiritually sensitive people and speaks of the many needs of all human beings. Worship makes me think of community, its needs as well as mine.

- But the script is fixed, the same week in, week out; year in, year out.

Not quite. Communities add or subtract material whenever the Siddur is re-published. Congregations often modify the Siddur for their own purposes. The first synagogue services seem to have been constructed out of the Psalms and responses which had been used in The Temple's worship. Since then much has been added and subtracted. At one time the Ten Commandments were recited at every service, a practice which was dropped more than fifteen hundred years ago. The Kaddish is only a thousand years old, the Yigdal hymn perhaps five hundred years. At one time the service included many erudite and abstruse hymns called piyyutim, most of which have disappeared.

- Still, I'm given a book and the service follows a predictable course.

Flexibility is one thing, formlessness quite another. Synagogue worship defines the basic themes of Jewish life and this is best done through a familiar

structure which reinforces the core themes and provides definition as well as the reassurance of continuity. Each age should have its own voice but not lose touch with the original voice. The sense of history is an encouraging one.

- What about relevance?

What about it? The Shema is as relevant as the day it was first spoken. The fact that God is one and that Israel feels a special relationship with "our God" hasn't changed. Moreover, most services include more than the readings. Thee's a talk, an opening and closing prayer, mention of events in the community's life. It's disconcerting. A matter of balance, too much repetition, can be boring; too much relevance can be disconcerting.

- I've always felt that the best service would be a happening - a happy, and perhaps unexpected, surprise. How can a moment which is consciously organized be genuine?

When a director uses a Shakespeare script or a conductor a Beethoven score we don't immediately say that he lacks originality. A skillful and knowledgeable handling of these texts can give us fresh insights as well as a great deal of pleasure. I'm puzzled when you limit creativity to original work as if there cannot be creative responses to another's thought or music. I've thought a lot about the twenty-third Psalm and written about it, and I would argue that it belongs as much to me as to King David.

- I still say they're somebody else's words.

So were the words in the pamphlet that youth group put together for its Dylan-Gibran service. I find the term, "creative service', uniquely inappropriate for a service which substitutes a few paragraphs written in haste or collected at random for a carefully chosen, time-tested, familiar bouquet of the best poetry and thought of a remarkably creative people.

- Why should your judgement be better than the kids'?

I've been at it longer. They're interested in one Friday night and I'm concerned with the continuity of the Jewish experience and the disciplines of the religious life, not a single presentation. A prayer book service need not be tired or uninspiring. I try to organize worship that is warm-hearted, not cold-eyed; full of melody, not cacaphony; hard thinks, not vapid; a moment of Jewish intimacy rather than alienation.

- At home every Sabbath service is the same.

Sameness has its virtue. I've always found that familiarity increases my pleasure in a serious piece of music or work of art. I bring more to it each time and take more away.

- It's dull.

People who doze through an opera continue to find opera dull.

Last Christmas a minister talked at our Rotary. He said that the church takes itself too seriously, that the religious moment should be a celebration of possibility and a freeing of the imagination. He has rock bands at his services. He wants people dancing in the aisles. Why not celebrate, he said, our love of a generous God we do not control and only dimly comprehend, but who cares for us. He made sense to me. His church must be a lively place. Incidentally, he didn't talk about worship as a Christian experience.

Did you attend one of his services?

- I did, and the church was full and lively.

Did he read from the New Testament and sign his prayers in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Ghost?

- Yes.

That was his way of signaling that this was a Christian experience.

- I'm sure you'd rule out rock music and modern dancers.

It would depend on the rock music and the dance. If the electronics drowned out thought or the choreography overwhelmed all sense of tradition, I wouldn't use the music. Part of our message is that we're to think about our lives and

values. A mindless experience isn't a Jewish experience.

- The Church obviously doesn't feel as constrained as you do.

Christian worship celebrates the good news that salvation has been made possible by a Saviour's coming. We're not ready yet for a victory celebration. Our worship talks to us of duty and possibility in a demanding world so that we will play our part in the world's redemption.

- I find your comparison of worship and theater interesting, though I would draw a conclusion from the analogy which I doubt will be pleasing to you. An evening at theater can be a pleasant or moving experience but of little lasting or practical benefit. That shouldn't be true of a Sabbath service. I don't think it's meant as entertainment. Worship should help me become a better person, but I leave services much as I came.

- You've earned a brownie point with God.

- I'm being serious.

Not all plays are simply entertainment. They can be, and often are, effective vehicles for the transmission of all kinds of ideas. Plays help me imagine other lives and often encourage us to change our political or social views. Worship, unfortunately, can be little more than an hour's entertainment, but it can also be much more: a binding experience, a challenging moment, a reminder of what must be done, a quiet but useful insight into some parts of our lives.

- Each play is unique. Our worship uses the same script week in and week out. It can't possibly have an impact on us every week.

Theaters have audiences. Synagogues have congregations. An audience comes largely unprepared. The evening is determined by what happens on the stage. The message, if there is one, must have a punch. Worshippers come prepared. They know much of what they will hear. Its virtue is reinforcement, a deepening of awareness, rather than the presentation of radically new ideas.

- Worship keeps me from unravelling. During the week my work and the family pull me in many directions. I look forward to the familiar words and music of Friday night as an hour to put Humpty Dumpty together again. I often leave that service feeling like Antaeus whose strength was renewed whenever his feet touched Mother Earth.

- Plays have a story line. Our service is formless, little more than a piling up of pious paragraphs.

Not so. Our worship is carefully arranged. We're welcomed by a call to God's worship, the Borechu, which consists of praises of God. To praise God is to remind ourselves what we owe to others and to The Other when we affirm the oneness of God and the community of Israel, our brotherhood. The Shema makes it clear that we worship the Holy One, praised be He, not the God of power or wealth or national ambition. Then, first silently, privately, then congregationally, we speak prayers of general need: "Favor us with knowledge," "Pardon our transgressions," "Bless this year and may its harvest bring us well-being," "Hear our prayers." On certain days the Torah is read and there is an interpretation of the reading as it relates to our lives. A sermon is presented. Finally, praise, affirmation, need and instruction are drawn together into an Adoration of the God of all mankind whose teachings will one day be acknowledged by all nations and peoples, then the Kaddish, an affirmation of life and of God's majesty which is used as a memorial prayer. Affirmation, not anger; death and life somehow conform to God's wisdom.

- I've never been aware of structure.

I'm always amazed at those who will reread Macbeth before going to a new production or look over the score of a symphony before going to a concert but who think that worship doesn't need the same kind of understanding.

- If I understand what you've been saying, you look on worship as providing the answer to the question we've been talking about all week: what is Judaism?

- You can't be serious.

- Most of us are practical folk and no one ever sat down and explained to me why I'd be better off if I went to services on Friday night than if I went out on the town. I remember someone telling me: God doesn't take attendance.

The discipline of worship helps us understand the Jewish message and to enlarge our lives through it.

- What about character? I haven't found that those who go to temple regularly are better or more sensitive than those who don't.

I've no statistics on the point. I don't think any exist. I know I do a lot of hard thinking about my life and my values when I'm in services and I assume others do too. Somehow it's harder for me to delude myself there than in my office.

- I find services wearying. They lay on guilt. There's all that sin talk,. I'm under enough pressure without worship adding to it.

We don't have confessional booths.

- But there's Yom Kippur and those heavy Yom Kippur refrains: "We have done perversely." I'm not perverse and life's tough enough without my religion laying guilt on me.

What would you have Yom Kippur be?

- What the minister said, a grand celebration of the possibilities of life.

That's exactly how I think of Yom Kippur - as a grand celebration of possibility; and it's Yom Kippur's specific emphasis on sin and confession which gives me that welcome sense of encouragement.

- How so?

Sin implies possibility. When I say, "I have sinned", I'm telling myself I might have acted differently.

- No one is guilty. We do what we do because of our environment, our conditioning, because our families raise us in a certain way. There are no bad

We can't read all the books Jews have written, so the service presents what's important.

Worship teaches us the language which lies at the heart of the Jewish experience and turns teaching into song. When it works, and it doesn't always, we begin to think as a Jew, sing as a Jew, and come alive as a Jew.

- A nice idea, but I seriously doubt that's the way it happens. Most services are dull and uninspiring. The words are either in Hebrew which I don't understand or in heavy English. I'm more likely to fall asleep than to feel spiritually enlivened.

It's what you bring as much as what is brought.

- I'm certainly not unique. Look at all the empty pews.

They're there for many reasons.

- Name one.

Impatience.

- I don't follow you.

Jews have picked up America's preference for action over contemplation. Worship is thinking time.

- There are more empty pews in my new synagogue than in my old church.

There's an old saying that when the world catches cold Jews contract pneumonia. But don't exaggerate the empty seats. For what it's worth, in the last decade or so Jews have begun attending services in larger numbers.

- Why?

My guess would be the Arab wars, nuclear warheads, fears of increasing anti-semitism, the instability of family relationships and loneliness; not necessarily in that order. Whenever the times become tense we need reassurance and the security of our roots.

- The problem's motivation. No one ever told me that if I didn't attend services I'd be damned.

children, only bad living conditions and careless parents. Have you read the psychologist, B. F. Skinner?

Yes.

He says we can only do or become what our genetic endowment and our environment allow us to be. He doesn't believe in sin. I agree with him.

Skinner is a determinist who believes Western civilization has encouraged us, to our hurt, in the illusion that we are free moral agents who can, by the exercise of will and determination, modify our behavior. He blames the Biblical religions for this state of affairs, all the do's and don'ts and sin talk. In his view we are not responsible for what we do and so he prescribes, in the cause of mental health, that we abandon what he calls the nonsense of freedom and recognize that there is no sin. We delude ourselves and often make ourselves ill, he believes, when we assume we could have followed some other path.

- I like the idea of no sin.

Skinner became something of a cult figure because he appeals to all those who are ready and eager to explain to anyone who will listen that the triviality of their lives is the fault of their parents or their environment.

- You've gone on at length about conditioning.

Endowment and environment play a role, but it is not the whole story. The Torah reports that God condemned the entire generation whic had endured Egyptian slavery to death in the wilderness, and the midrash explains that God did so because their spirit had been broken and diminished by their servitude, so much so that they lacked the initiative and grit pioneers require.

Freedom is certainly not an absolute.

- A schizophrenic isn't in command of himself.

- I'm color blind. I couldn't paint if my life depended on it.

I said there are limits. Freedom is circumscribed within those limits. We can, and do, choose between compromise and principle, between caring for others

and caring for ourselves.

- What chance do slow children have?

Less than your children or mine, but America's history records that in each generation millions of families escaped the slums.

Everything, including freedom, has limits. I can't by any act of will develop talents I don't have, but I can develop these skills with which I am endowed or leave them unshaped. Behaviorists like Skinner liken man to an animal. An animal remains what he was born, forever a creature of instinct. Jewish thought emphasizes that the human animal, a creature of instinct, can become a human being, a creature of sensitivity, who can choose at times to control his appetites and instincts. More than this, the Torah tradition asserts that in the area of moral judgement we should think and act as if there were no limits on our freedom since these are, in fact, fewer than we think and the more practiced and disciplined we become in choosing discipline over indulgence, the greater our freedom of action becomes.

- How does Yom Kippur make this point?

Sin says, "you're responsible," "You can be other than you are," and that's an encouraging thought. When I say 'I have sinned' I am forced to consider the more I should do and can do, and it's that "should" and that "can" which allows me to leave Yom Kippur encouraged. As I confess my sins I recognize I'm not shackled to them. My world becomes gray only when I feel that I can't effect what's happening to me.

- But we never get out from under. Next year's Yom Kippur is already scheduled.

Yom Kippur focuses on growth, not on purity. There are no saints. "There is no man on earth so righteous that he sins not." Yom Kippur suggests to us that what God wants of us is sensitivity, humaneness, moral growth - not perfection.

If He wanted us to be angels He'd have made us angels.

- But what about guilt?

What about it? As with all things in life, there's healthy guilt, a prodding conscience; and morbid guilt, groveling abjectness. Should we deny that we're responsible for the quality of our lives just because some can't handle that responsibility? If it didn't sound like I was playing with words I'd say that the absence of a strong sense of sin is the besetting sin of our age. We have a dozen ready explanations for every failure. Our mothers loved us too much or too little. We grew up on the streets or in the lap of luxury. We've raised excuse-making into an art form and even developed statistics and graphs to make our excuses sound scientific.

- Excuse-making isn't a modern invention. Adam and Eve were already adept at the art.

God does not ask the impossible, but he certainly expects us not to settle for a life of excuses and inaction. I find it suggestive that our founders routed the Jewish experience in an act of conscious choice. God ordered Abraham to leave home or stay. He didn't have to go, but he went. The responsibility to choose growth over compromise is underscored in almost every line of Torah teaching. "See I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. Choose life."

- We've moved a long way from worship.

Not really. Worship keeps before us the responsibility of making the best choices of which we are capable. "O house of Jacob, come and let us walk in the light of the Lord."

Chapter 11

TRUE AND ENDURING IS THY WORD - OR IS IT?

Saturday night dinner was over and we were sitting on the porch of the lodge, talking over our conversations.

- My father is an architect. I often complained about school work and he'd remind me that a building that isn't solidly based will shift and ultimately collapse. I've thought about his little speech a good bit this week. How can I take seriously a message which isn't solidly based. The Bible's a book full of fairy stories. Last year I took an interest in a Bible course. The Noah story turns out to be an Israelite redo of a well-known Middle Eastern myth. In the original story the gods use a flood to punish earthlings whose noisy activities have disturbed their royal slumbers and the hero is saved because he was good looking and a goddess took a shine to him. I was impressed by the skill with which the Israelites transformed the original myth into a saga which reinforced their conviction that those who live honorably need not fear that God will abuse them. In Genesis God decides to destroy mankind because of the world's wickedness and Noah is saved because he is a righteous man. The Genesis version makes an important point, but it's a myth. There was no Noah and no Ark, and I don't understand how anyone can credit as scripture a book which is full of such fancies.

Stories convey ideas which logic and philosophy cannot express. Moreover, you must recognize that ancient Israel didn't consider these materials as sacred in the same way pre-modern Christians and Jews did. There was no Bible in what are called Bible days. The myths of creation and the flood were well-known and trusted stories, but they were not yet accepted as revelation. Nowhere in the Noah chapters is the claim that God had revealed the facts about the flood. That claim was advanced only much later when piety turned the whole Torah into God's

speech.

- Why was such a story left in the Torah?

There was no reason not to. It had become part of the repertoire of the chanters and storytellers who recited to Israel the beloved legends about the beginning of the human race. The Torah's editors did not define their task as editing out all those portions of their people's myth and history which were not specifically claimed to be God's words.

They brought together that literature which was known and revered. It was only much later that the idea became popular that the whole Five Books of Moses had been dictated by God to Moses.

Even if I accept your argument about the Torah's origins and the value of stories - myths, I've still got a problem with the value of Torah. The text is full of contradictions. Take the Noah chapters: some sentences indicate that the animals came into the Ark in pairs, in other places we're told they came in groups of seven. It's a small thing, but it raises for me a big question: how can there be a special message, a true message, in a book which contains contradictions?

You raise a serious issue. The Bible's contradictions involve fundamental principles, not just detail. An example: a sentence in the Ten Commandments suggests that there may be other, to be sure, inferior gods besides the one God. "You shall have no other gods <u>before Me</u>"; while Deutero Isaiah makes the categorical statement: "Before Me no other god was formed; and after Me none shall exist." How right was the Biblical concept of monotheism? Another example: another sentence in the Ten Commandments suggests that guilt clings in a family passing down from father to son: God will "visit the sins of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generation." On the other hand, the prophet Ezekiel insists: "a son shall not share the burden of his father's guilt."

- You've made my point, not answered it.

_ As I said, Biblical man didn't have a Bible. He cherished a body of sacred learning, law and liturgy - some oral, some written down - which was gradually shaped into texts and subsequently canonized as Scripture. This body of material was prized for many reasons, and explained to the community by priests and sages who defined its implications for many reasons. No one researched these texts for doctrinal consistency since they were known to those who lived within a coherent culture. When it came time to organize these materials into texts, these changed with this work, wisely gave more weight to the reverence and popularity of a passage than to its logical consistence with other portions of the anthology they were creating. Nor were they at all abashed by the idea that a concept and its opposite might be true. Life isn't neat. Human nature and the societies humans create are ripe with inescapable contradictions.

My sister carried her Confirmation Bible at her wedding. She said it made her feel that God was there. Talismans have their value, but the Bible clearly isn't God's word. How did people ever get the crazy notion that it was The Truth?

Truth is as truth does. The Bible helped catalyse Western civilization. It contains ideas which enable the West to free itself from the limiting and all-pervasive conditioning of the pagan world. I've already suggested to you that the Biblical vision cleared the way for modern science.

Yet, the religious have always tried to impede science. The Church forced Galilee to recant and our fundamentalists want to get out of the public schools.

Nevertheless, I'll stick by my statement. In the pagan world the gods were seen as animating spirits within all the phenomena of nature. There was a sun god, a moon god, river gods. Each god went his or her own way and did their thing. Judaism thought of God as creator of all that is. In this perspective nature was no longer an accumulation of gods busy at being gods but a natural universe full of objects which can be studied. Pagans were afraid to study nature, fearing that by so doing they would incur divine wrath. Moreover, gods by definition are

unknowable, they cannot be studied. Those can be studied, the gods cannot.

- For me the Bible's great advance is the Shema. Racism is mankind's greatest curse and monotheism gave the lie to all master race theories. I'm an old civil rights-nik, for me the Bible's greatest sentence is, "Have we not all one Father, has not one God created us all?"

Don't minimize the other side of that coin, the Bible's unremitting attacks on idolatry. Idolatry is the arrogance of certainty and we've still got plenty of that about.

- The Bible can be an idol. I've watched as preachers wave the Book as they talk of proof of whatever argument they're making.

Some of the cautions the rabbis cultivated grew out of their recognition that the ultimate meaning of any text remains shrouded in mystery. Any reading must be tentative: "My thoughts are not your thoughts. . .for as the Heavens are higher than the Earth, so are My thoughts than yours."

The Bible's spare style seems almost deliberately chosen to underscore this approach. More is left unsaid than explained. There are few descriptions and fewer explanations of motivation. In the famous story of Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac, we aren't told why God decided to test Abraham, what Abraham thought about God's decision, anything about Isaac's feelings, where they were when God made His demand, what Abraham felt during the three-day journey. Whenever I read this chapter and others of equal power, I feel the text challening me to understand its message.

- Are you sure that anything's really there?

I can prove it. The Torah is read through, as you know, in an annual cycle. Every week for the last two thousand years the designated section of the Torah has been read in every synagogue and on each occasion every congregation found some message for its situation. If the word miracle has any meaning, it applies to Scripture. Can you think of any other work which has had this capacity to be unceasingly relevant and insightful?

- I'd argue that Jews have read relevance, their ideas, into the text rather than read the text to find there God's ideas.

Undoubtedly, that was sometimes the case, but the text had to be the starting point.

- You don't really believe God had anything to do with the Torah?

I believe that Moses and others perceived some of the meaning God intended them to and set it down, that it's available to those who persevere, and that these meanings have proven their worth over and over again by providing an intellectually and spiritually liberating understanding of the world and man's place in it.

- The Torah is just a book, like any other.

You sound like an academic colleague who enjoys reading the Bible as literature. He calls the Deuteronomic historian a master storyteller, "Homer's equal"; but he insists that "to claim more is absurd." "How can you call divine a book which contains an outdated science, a record of a six-day creation, and laws which require adulteresses to be stoned and witches burned?"

- Precisely.

Then how do you explain the hold the Bible has exerted on so many people's deepest feelings? No other classic has ever commanded such veneration or catalysed such a radical transformation of cultural values.

- The Bible must have had a good press agent.

The Bible was written in an obscure Near Eastern dialect - Hebrew was spoken by only a small fraction of the people of the area. There are no records of any major publicity, missionary, campaign. It was the Bible itself, not any hoop-la, which commanded it to the world. You can't even argue that. like the Koran later, its text was popularized by conquest.

- Our prayerbook this morning included the sentence: "The Torah of the Lord is perfect." I know it's from a pslam, poetry, but it's also a lie. You've talked of the contradictions.

Finish the phrase: "The Torah of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul." The Torah's perfection lies in its invigorating spiritual power. The mystery of the Torah, its divinity, is the ability of this Iron Age text to stimulate Space Age minds.

- Preachers twist texts to make their point.

Some do. Most don't. Remember that when the Psalmist spoke of Torah as perfect, he was referring to the living faith or, rather, his understanding of its teaching, not of a book. Just as he did so, we should interpret each portion in our understanding of the spirit of the living religion.

- I'd bet our Martian couldn't make some of the connections you've made between the Torah portion and your sermon.

Of course not. He'd know only the bare text. My text refracts the depths and delights added to it by three thousand years of associations.

- You're reading in, not reading out.

Simple deductive logic isn't the only tool we possess to explore a text's meaning. Imagination has a legitimate role to play in this process.

- You simply put there what you want to find there.

You make the art of commentary sound like deliberate chicanery. It's not. The rabbis revered the Torah and would never have deliberately interpreted the text in a way they felt to be illegitimate. They were devoted Jews who believed that the Torah was God's word, not a self-serving class of ecclesiastics out to protect and preserve their privileges. It is through the process of continuous commentary that the river of our living faith has been able to remain refreshing to us.

- Commentary piles on. The Bible's just another classic.

It's a classic which has proven to be an unceasing and compelling source of inspiration. Try to put your determined realism aside for a moment and see

that very special power. The Bible provides us an approach to the realm of meaning which lies behind our world of familiar, but never fully understood, experiences.

- Explain yourself.

Philosophers as well as poets acknowledge that beside or behind the world which our senses recognize, there is another world, a world that lies deeper, the world where there are ultimate truths. The sky is part of space, empty, yet filled with energy; of fixed dimension, yet infinitely expanding. The Torah, like the sky, is at first glance an attractive and thought-provoking text which can be read through in a given number of hours, but there's wisdom there which cannot be mined by a single reading. I've studied Torah all my life and almost always I've found a new idea, an insight of value.

- We took a beach vacation sometime ago and, unfortunately, it rained every day. I read through the few paperbacks we had and then picked up the only other book in our room, the Gideon Bible. I read it from cover to cover. I liked some parts. Much of it was downright boring. It wasn't a painful experience, some of the images are powerful, but I didn't get any earthshaking insights.

Like the Martian, you read the bare text. You read Torah without the envelope of the larger Torah, the whole Jewish tradition, without the overlays of wisdom which add geometrically to our benefit. The bare text is just that, bare of the wisdom invested in it by a hundred generations.

- I haven't time for all those commentaries, Rashi, Ibn Ezra, you rabbis are always quoting. Besides, they're certainly out of date.

Yes, if you mean unaware of the latest in archeological or from critical research, they're medieval; but they're rich in insight into the human condition. If you don't want an older commentary, read modern ones. There are some good ones which will provide you what a quick read can't, a useful perspective, how, when, where, why the text first appeared; what role the text has played in the development of Jewish thought. You'll learn which texts have been seminal and which have tended not to have as rich a history.

- I thought everything in the Bible's important.

Not really, at least not for those whose interest is in Torah. Deborah sang a great victory song when her armies defeated the Canaanites. Historians and linguists are delighted by it because it's one of the few earliest literary documents in the collection and tells us a good bit about how the Israelite tribes were organized during the years when they first came to prominence in Palestine. On the other hand, there's not much of spiritual value in these verses. The poem's god is a war god, praised for his might rather than for any other attribute, the god of the tribes rather than the god of all peoples. Not surprisingly, this poem has never been included in our liturgy.

But it's all called Scripture.

Not by us. Scripture is a Latin term popularized by the Church. What they call Scripture we call Tanak, an acronym for the three divisions into which the sages divided the Biblical canon, T = Torah, N = Neviim, the prophets, K = Ketuvim, the writings. Jews have never assumed that all the books of the Bible are equally sacred. Only the Torah is kept in the Ark.

- But the Five Books of Moses are deemed sacred - revealed.

Yes, by rabbinic Judaism. I prefer sacred to revealed since all these chapters have been revered, but not all have always been treated as revealed.

- You told us the story of how Moses was astonished at what Akiba found in the Torah text. You said Akiba insisted that the apparent meaning of a text was only one of its many meanings, that each word, each letter, even the way a letter was formed suggested other truths. Moses must have felt Akiba's explanations were as contrived as I sometimes feel about a sermon.

Reason can take us only so far into the meaning of life. At some point informed imagination must take over. Research has shown that scientific discovery rarely takes place by a steady process of logical investigation. At some point in the process, the investigator suddenly gets an idea. He's inspired. We'd be

foolish and short-sighted to dismiss out of hand imaginative commentary by informed minds. In Akiba's case, his imaginative explanations shaped rabbinic Judaism.

- That's awfully close to saying: believe what's absurd.

Not so. I'm saying trust both sides of your mind. I'm saying reason can be a stultifying straight-jacket and that the imagination can sometimes liberate ideas which could be exposed in no other way.

- You sound more and more as if you believe in revelation. I can't take voices from outer space seriously.

Don't identify revelation with a literal reading such Biblical phrases as: "and the Lord said to . . ." or the conventions of the movies in which a bass voice booms out of the clouds, light rises in the background, and everybody "knows" this is God talking. Revelation suggests mental and imaginative process which, to a degree, we've all shared.

- I seem to remember that the Torah describes thunder, lightning and horn-blowing on Mount Sinai.

That was a conventional way of saying, 'pay attention, this is important.' But what was important was the words which were apprehended, not the fanfare which announced them.

- Define revelation.

Revelation is catching sight of what is normally hidden from view because of our preoccupation with the world of everyday tasks. Revelation is an emergence into civilization of truth or beauty never before available, the breaking out of the hidden into the known. New ideas do come into our consciousness from unsuspected levels of awareness and in unexpected ways. You puzzle over a research problem and then one day a series of ideas fall into place. Some call it intuition, others inspiration, others revelation. My point is that what Jews call revelation is out of the ordinary only in the truly dramatic consequences of the truths which were apprehended.

- How's revelation different from falling in love?

In many ways it isn't. People who work together or simply have fun together sometimes unexpectedly find that friendship has become love. A new reality has emerged, depths of feelings have come into play, and often neither person really knows how it happened.

- I hike a lot, and most times I simply work up a good sweat, but sometimes as I walk over a field or follow a trail I suddenly sense a beauty, a power, I had not felt before. It's as if I'd suddenly tuned in to a different frequency.

- You're talking about intuition, what I feel in a bridge game when I know I should play a certain card. Sometimes I'm right and I tend not to remember all the times it didn't work out. We all get and tell stories about some sudden inspiration, but our intuition may lead us into serious mistakes. There were "true" prophets and "false" prophets. In terms of prediction, I suppose the "true" prophets were simply luckier. The prophets whose speeches are included in the Bible seem not to have had any better record in predicting the future than others. They're included because of the power of their ideas. "True" prophets were concerned and sensitive individuals who had thought long and hard about God, man, justice, and politics, and who found or "saw" ideas of particular force and consequence. False prophets found or "saw" insignificant or meaningless ideas. Our message is a miracle not because it came to us through prophets but that the message has made such remarkable and sense that it laid the groundwork for all of Judaism. The ultimate test was the importance of the message.

We learn some things through hard thinking, step-by-step logic, days of preparation and testing. We learn other things unexpectedly when an arc sparks between the active mind and the deeper levels of reality. A scientist may have a brainstorm. When the burdened soul touches the life force, God, and finds strength flowing into itself that, too, is revelation. When the mind wrestles with the con-

ditions of our lives and suddenly the pieces fall together and fresh, strong ideas replace conventional wisdom that, too, is revelation. A poet's ear may catch the sounds of the subterranean stream of meaning which is always there but which most of us never hear. I call such a passage from one level of understanding to another revelation. Certainly, the experience has been too broadly shaped for us to discount it.

- Sparks may fly without any real illumination. I'm thinking of the brain storms of the mad scientist.

As I said, there were true prophets and false prophets. Some prophets spoke gibberish, others like Jeremiah, Jesus or Mohammed spoke ideas which millions find compelling.

- How did people know who to trust?

There's no sure test, but somehow you can feel when an idea is right. There's an immediacy and a simplicity to it which makes you say why didn't I think of this before.

- Then revelation isn't limited to the will and words of God?

Socrates had a daimon who whispered truths in his ear and many of our best scientists have testified that they found their way in a sudden and unexpected way. God is the source of meaning. All insight represents God disclosing to us something of Himself.

- Imagination, intuition and insight can lead us on a merry chase to nowhere. My research associate had a "flash" and lost a year of work trying to prove his intuition. The idea didn't fly.

Not all flashes prove out, but his experience doesn't disprove that this is the way truth often emerges from the depths.

- I still can't conceive of God speaking to anyone.

The Torah uses speech to define a far more complex process for which the ancients had no term. Those who had this experience had no option but to use a

human attribute to describe the breaking through process. Today we use more conventional terms like insight or intuition, but we're no closer to fathoming or explaining the experience.

- I paint, sometimes before I put any paint on the canvass. I don't know how it gets there or how to describe the process which put it there. I've no problem with intuition or inspiration, or even revelation, but what I have felt is a private experience and the Bible claims that thousands heard God at Sinai and instantly recognized the value of the new ideas. As a description of inspiration, the Sinai story is, to say the least, misleading.

Sinai was not as broadly broadcast as you make it out to be. Actually, the text indicates that the assembly heard only the first word or two of the revelation and then were so frightened by the experience that they asked God to use Moses as an intermediary. I read the detail of an opening public statement as a device to underscore the reliability of the message that was received. It was a way of saying: this is God, not Moses, talking. A new message was at stake and it was crucial that its source be seen as in God rather than a fallible human, Moses

- If someone came up to me and said: "God told me" this or that, I'd suggest he see a psychiatrist.

I would, too. We're not Iron Age Jews. We've read Freud. We know about the sub-conscious and the two sides of the brain. We take for granted that speech is too crude a term to describe revelation.

- If my grandfather could have heard this discussion he'd have said, you're bright but your learning only complicates what's simple. You haven't explained Sinai any better than the Torah did with the words: thus says the Lord. Why not leave well enough alone?

Because we're twentieth century creatures who think in analytic terms and take for granted the Bible's language.

- Your grandfather was raised in a different culture than ours and, for better or worse, we can't take our pieties as simply as he did.

- I still don't see how you can treat the phenomenon of revelation analytically and read the Bible critically and still revere the text as inspired.

Light is both a wave of energy and a cluster of active particles, and science has discovered that it is impossible to measure those two properties simultaneously. I've come to analogize Torah to light. If you look at the Torah and see only the text you will not hear the voices within. If you look at the Torah and see only the word of God you will not see the seams, the editings and contradictions.

Every week I handle two Torahs: a printed Hebrew text which I keep in my library and in which I annotate in the margins, and the Torah scroll which I read as part of a sacred ritual and which I wouldn't dream of marking up. I handle my library text seriously, but unceremoniously. I seek in it the history and culture of ancient Israel. I make notes. I erase. I handle the Torah scroll reverently and before and after reading from it I speak a blessing which offers heartfelt thanks to God for the gift of His Instruction. I sense in that Torah Israel's special and surprising message for me and my times.

- No one will argue that the Bible has played a major role in Jewish life over the centuries, but it still seems to me that what you call the Torah's compelling power says more about your needs than about the book itself. Haven't Jews projected onto or into the Torah what we needed to find there? Isn't it because Jews are accustomed to locating their special message in the Torah that we continue to find it there? We expect wisdom and, being inventive, found it.

Maybe, but then how do you explain how that special sense of holiness came originally to be associated with this book?

In many ways the miracle of Sinai is not that God spoke - the deeper meanings are always there and people in all cultures have sensed some of these imperatives - but that a whole people responded to this new message and were prepared to shape their future around it. The tradition, with good reason, uses two terms for revelation, "the giving of Torah" and "the acceptance of Torah" and it is the latter which is the cornerstone of Jewish history, the founding miracle.

- I'm beginning to think of you as a closet mystic.

I've never hidden the fact. There have been times when I suddenly recognized that what I or another had said had the ring of truth, not the truth of text books, common sense or experience, but an ultimate and irreducible truth. I believe Israel sensed that power in the Torah and that this fountain of living waters is the enlivening source of our faith.

The sun was disappearing. It was time for Havdalah. The brief moment between sundown and sunset on the Sabbath, according to our mystics, is a bewitching time particularly appropriate to miracles and mysteries, so I closed with a favorite line from The Zohar. "The Torah stories are the garments of God's wisdom. This is why David prays: 'Open my eyes that I may see wondrous things out of Your Torah,' namely, that which is beneath the Torah's garments."

We watched the sun set. We sang the folk tune which encourages Elijah to hasten to us with the news that the Messiah is on his way. As we sang I hoped some of the singers were sensing the mystery of a hopeful world, if not of God.

Chapter 12

IS MAN THE MESSIAH?

A lazy Sunday morning is a time when conversation turns naturally towards the philosophical. Today was Sunday. Someone suggested that since religions exist to satisfy specific human needs, we would do well to examine human nature.

- We're mortal. Three score years and ten about does it for most of us.

- That doesn't say much.

- Death explains religion. We don't want to die, so we invent myths and rites that give us the illusion that the grave is not the end and that another life awaits us beyond the pearly gate.

Death puzzles and disturbs everyone, but it's not our only profound anxiety and perhaps not the most disturbing; we worry about relationships, feelings and, most of all, the purpose of it all, are our efforts really worth the effort. Religions exist to help us overcome paralyzing doubt and to give us some confidence in all these areas.

- Explain to me something. We're all made the same way and have the same needs. Why, then, are there different religions, each offering different explanations and confirming different values?

Consciousness always bears the imprint of culture. From birth a child is conditioned by his environment whose values come to seem natural to him and any religion which speaks to him must speak in terms he understands and reflect his special condition. Human nature also always bears the inpress of culture which is why philosophers answer the question, what is man, in terms of their cultural biases.

- We're apes.

We're human apes.

- You're saying the same thing.

Not so. To speak of us as apes is to emphasize our animal ancestry and make-up. If we're apes we're creatures ruled by instinct and it follows that strict

rules and strong restraints are necessary to check our predatory instincts. To speak of us as human apes is to suggest that our instincts are controllable by will and wisdom, our humanity. Those who like this view generally argue that creating a loving and caring environment which will allow our human potential to grow and assert itself must be the key political effort. Given a decent chance, people will be decent. What's needed are imaginative programs of social reform.

- Who's right?

If the world's wise men were polled I'm afraid we would discover that most of them would vote for the less flattering proposition. Our world has rarely known peace and has learned that generosity of spirit is usually an erratic impulse, so those who look at the world without flinching tend to see us as un-dependable creatures who need to be kept in line.

- Not hard to see why. We've been fighting and killing each other ever since Cain murdered Abel.

In power liberators become oppressors and revolutionaries become tyrants. The early Christians applaud Jesus' pacifism by going on bloody crusades, and Ghandi's followers now honor his belief in non-resistance by establishing an atomic arsenal. Again and again human beings prove themselves short-sighted, cowardly, close-minded, greedy, prejudiced or worse. History certainly makes melancholy reading.

- You sound like the little man in Steig's cartoon, crouched in a box, saying to himself: "People are no damn good." Actually, I know a lot of fine people. I like to think I'm one myself.

History makes melancholy reading because historians, like journalists, have tended to write about the dramatic and wars and assassinations are drama - all the tragedy that's fit to print. Few history books describe teachers and their classes or the love which is shown every day inside most families. I'm convinced that the real history of the human race hasn't yet been written. There's

native decency. What used to be called original sin, the all-too-evident perversities of human nature, are not genetic endowment but the unhappy result of broken homes, poverty and racism. If everyone had enough there would be no reason to steal. If everyone was loved, no one would build a hard shell around his soul.

A fraternity brother was caught stealing. He came from a rich family and had plenty of money. He told us he stole because it was a thrill. He needed to live dangerously.

- He's an exception. Most thieves steal out of need

- Or to sustain a drug habit.

- That's a need.

When Adam and Eve were in Paradise they had everything they could possibly need, but they found a way to spoil things. It's a mistake to explain away all anti-social behavior. Quirks, perversities and ambition, are only a few of the motives which determine behavior in ways which have little to do with justice and economics.

- How does Judaism describe our nature?

Some of our texts describe us as little lower than the angels, and others emphasize that we are not angels, "There is no one on earth so righteous that he sins not." A favorite rabbinic construct describes human nature as embracing polar energies, one generous and loving, the other competitive and demanding, both innate and inescapable. The human animal can become a human being but can never put aside his animal nature. The human being can always improve himself but never shed his instincts and emotional makeup. That's why in the past most of our teachers rejected the idolizing of any hero, even Moses, no one is perfect; and why today we reject doctrinaire humanism. Human actions are always of complex motivation and so do not provide a certain enough measure to be the basis of any meaningful ethical standards.

a great deal of good in people which is lost forever because we don't notice it.

- Steig's wrong when he says that people are no damn good, but the romantics are equally wrong when they say people are basically good, that we're born innocent, energetic but malleable, and that the cruelty people exhibit is the result of the pressures of a misshapen society. We're not apes and we're nor angels. We're humans. The question is not are we by nature good or bad, we're full of contradiction, but how much do we do with our endowment. There are no born saints. We all have moments of anger. At times we act on impulse. There are unconscious as well as conscious motives in all we do. The test is to live gracefully and usefully, and to make the best of the potential which is ours. Character is an achievement, hard-earned and hard to sustain, not a natural endowment.

Exactly. The very name by which we call ourselves expresses what you've been saying. Jacob was first called Israel after he wrestled the long night with an angel, with his fears, and was not thrown. Israel means "he who struggled with powers divine." The myth, incidentally, does not indicate that Jacob won that struggle, only that he was not defeated. We can't fully transcend our instincts, a truth the Bible drives home by portraying the faults and failings of our founding fathers as well as their accomplishments. Noah has many virtues, that's why he is saved, but he's given to drink. Abraham gives in to Sarah's demand that Hagar be driven away. Jacob schemed to gain Esau's birthright. The patriarchs were flawed, but they also had the strength to do many fine things - like any of us.

You spoke of a poll of the world's wise men. I think if you polled only our generation you'd find us less pessimistic than they seem to have been.· Most people, I'm sure, would agree that it's the injustices of society and the cruelties and ignorance of the people who form his world, the unhappy experiences of childhood, which ultimately block and distort the natural expression of a child's

- If we're by nature creatures full of contradictory drives we'll never resolve our problems.

Utopia is, as the name implies, U-topus, no place.

- You mean we're consigned to frustration?

- But not necessarily to violence and war. The world was not created as paradise. There will always be challenge. That doesn't worry me as much as our impatience does. Most of us want solutions and the more our reforms fail to accomplish what they seem to promise, the more radical become our demands and the more willing we become to attempt final solutions. Frustrated idealism leads many into terrorism or tyranny as we make desperate efforts to impose a new order on the old.

- You're talking about the Gulag State.

And the Cultural Revolution and the Red Brigade and every ideology which has ceased to worry whether its means and materials are moral. I'm suggesting why Judaism has so often praised that rarely practiced virtue, humility. Humility is the ability to say, 'I could be wrong.' When we say omniscience belongs only to God, we're also saying that every ideology and every religion contains at best a partial appreciation of truth and so cannot justify immoral means to achieve its goals.

You say there will always be problems. What about the promise of a time when "the lion and the lamb shall lie down together and a little child shall lead them." That's in the Bible.

It's in the book of Isaiah in a portion where the prophet describes a period called "the End of Days", a technical term in Biblical Hebrew for an era after the human condition, as we know it, has ceased, when God will create another world and people it with a breed of humans whose nature will differ from ours, they will possess "a new heart and a new spirit", and presumedly no libido.

- That's a wild idea. Life here will come to an end some day when the sun explodes; but I can't imagine God repopulating this world with angels.

The ancients believed that there had been worlds before this one and there would be a series of worlds after it. At some time in the future our world would end in a Day of Judgment and then God would repopulate the earth with a new and better breed.

- It will never happen.

Agreed, but then our ancestors felt the constraints of human nature more intensely than we do. Our technical achievements have given us a feeling they never had, that we can change our world for the better.

- I'm an optimist. I believe the world's on the brink of a major breakthrough. It's not only industry and technology. For the first time we're beginning to understand the mind. We're going to be able to treat and, I hope, eliminate anti-social behavior.

- That's brainwashing.

- We already treat some depressions successfully with drugs.

I've always looked on messiah talk as hoping against hope. It seems to me that we don't need the messiah anymore because we have good reason to be sanguine about the future. Because of our machines, man's no longer a two-legged pack animal. Medicine reduced the dangers of birth and infancy and of early death. The standard of living of hundreds of millions of people has been radically improved. We don't have to wait for a messiah to create the good life for us, we can do it ourselves.

- Things don't provide happiness.

- Don't kid yourself. Prosperity helps. There's no joy in poverty.

You're right about the messiah. As industry, medicine, and prosperity changed the conditions under which people lived, the children of those who worked in the mines and sweat shops went to college and began to live infinitely more expansive lives. They looked on life differently than their parents. They believed in change. They were their own proof that human nature can be changed for the better. Professor Higgins's determination to transform Liza Doolittle

from street girl into a lady is the perfect symbol of man's new confidence in himself.

- They must have seeen the price of progress. Didn't they read Dickens?

London slums and company towns in the coal fields of West Virginia were the places they had left and which their children would never see. Hard work was the key. Readers doted on Horatio Alger success stories and it became an article of faith that the prosperous had earned their privilege and that the drunken cruelties of slum life were the result of poverty and ignorance and would give way as the many took advantage of their opportunity.

- Were they really that naive?

They proved their own beliefs. They had worked hard and look at the changes for the better it had made in them.

But we're talking about robber barons and bankers who thought nothing of foreclosing on farmers who had suffered a bad crop.

We're not given to looking critically at ourselves. In any case, the new confidence based on material and mechanical success was not limited to the wealth. It influenced many who had a sensitive social conscience. The nineteenth century was the age of the social visionary - Owen, Sain Simon, Fourier, Tolstoy, Kropothin, men who were convinced that the perversions of human behavior which they saw all about them would be eliminated as prosperity and planning made possible a non-coercive and just social order. Almost all of these visions were fueled by the naive feeling that the human was by nature good and that anti-social behavior was the result of the diseases of poverty, ignorance and the unjust distribution of the world's goods. Once society was properly reformed, our innate decency would again be expressed. Much of the scandal that Freud created with his research into the dark corners of the mind suggested that it would not be so easy, if it was at all possible, to effect this plan for the betterment of the human race.

- A baby is an innocent.

Freud's studies into infant sexuality and aggression suggested that innocence is not a term which is appropriate to a baby's emotional system. We are not born innocent. We are born with animal instincts and with the capacity to sublimate these instincts into useful activity.

- Slums and poverty do twist the spirit.

True, but that doesn't prove that even an ideal society can guarantee that every child will grow up to be a loving, sensitive and cooperative adult.

- The problem with these visionary plans lay in the fact that they paid too little attention to education. If you put people who have never learned to live in a city, illiterates, into decent housing they're still not able to manage the city's pressures, and they may not be able to maintain their homes or their lives. Education is the key. Knowledge gives us control over our lives. No one can manage in our complex society without being able to read, write and keep a budget - and education takes time.

An educated person is an educated person, not necessarily a good person. Three of four death squads, Einsatzgruppen, sent out by Himmler to eliminate the Jews of Eastern Europe were commanded by men who had earned graduate degrees in German's deservedly famous universities. If those with college degrees no longer get drunk on Saturday night in the local bar it's because they get drunk in somewhat more elegant surroundings.

- I remain convinced that when we provide an open, sympathetic and reasonable environment, children will grow up without developing the hard shell, the defenses, which shut others out and shrivel the soul. Education can teach us how to organize more humane and more flexible institutions and these, in turn, will incubate gentler and kinder people. The kibbutzim are in many ways my model.

The kibbutz is now the world's longest-lived voluntary communitarian experiment and studies of its children indicate that while the shares of prosperity

and activity, the sense of trust and community which the kibbutz at its best provide does lessen the child's need to develop competitive skills, it does not eliminate the innate contradictions or complexities of his emotional nature. The kibbutz child can be as temperamental or malicious as his counterpart elsewhere. He has the same needs for a compelling vision and can be as attracted to the more bizarre cults as other youngsters. A rough childhood can harden the shell and a loving home often makes it easier for us to express our feelings, but however we're raised we are, and never cease to be, human beings. As a student wrote me on a Confirmation examination where I had asked for an explanation of each of the Ten Commandments, "Honor your father and your mother - this means that you should respect your parents because they raise you to the best of your ability."

- You seem to be saying there's nothing for us to do but sit back and watch each generation repeat the mistakes of every other generation. Where's our hope?

To say that we can't shed our instincts, that the contradiction of human nature will never be fully resolved, and that our lives will always be full of problems, is not the same as saying that we can't improve in what we ahve or who we are. Prosperity and political reforms have remarkably raised the nation's standard of living. Literacy and opportunity are on the rise in most parts of the world. We have limitations, but also strengths. After each of the first days of creation, the text in Genesis adds: "God saw what He had done and it was good." When Adam is created, the text elaborates this happy judgment, "God saw what He had done and it was very good." Commentators took this to mean that everything in nature, including the various animal species, are and remain what God intended them to be while man - Adam stands for all of us - is left unfinished. Animals are. A horse will always be a horse. We become. The human animal can become a human being. Personality and character depend in part on what we're given, our genes, but,perhaps to a greater extent, on the wit, will, and wisdom

with which we organize our lives.

- But you don't see any end to our problems.

It's only natural to want our problems to end. That's why children have always believed in fairy queens and adults in messiahs. But I'm afraid there's no such magic and I don't find it uncomfortable to think of life as an unremitting challenge. Happiness to me includes the joy of measuring up well to demanding and important tasks, the simcha shel mitzvah. It's quite an honor to be "a partner with God in the work of creation," part of the process we call civilization.

- But not enough. Work's a necessity, not a virtue.

During a complicated operation every talent of a surgeon, every part of his being, is alive, and so is every talent of an artist during a concert.

- I'm talking about feeling - love, creativity, delicious experiences - Thoreau at Walden Pond - satisfactions which have nothing to do with work.

- History is a record of human absurdities. Tomorrow the bomb may fall. I don't think the world has too much longer to go. I can't get out of my mind the sub-title Winston Churchill chose for the last volume of his memoirs: "How the great democracies triumphed and so were able to resume the follies which had so nearly cost them their life."

What's your point?

You're offering me weak tea when I need a stiff drink. You've been saying religion's virtue is that it offers a vision, hope. Fine, where is it? I need to dream and you're saying all I can really expect is to be able to cope. You're advocating a commendable steadiness but it's too chastened an attitude for me. I want something more than to be told square my chin, roll up my sleeves, get to work but not to expect that I'll get to the Promised Land.

- You've mistaken my meaning. I'm not a stoic philosopher. The stoic doctrine

of Artaraxis, unfeeling resignation, was a Greek, not a Jewish, prescription. When the Greeks were saying, don't care too much, the rabbis were emphasizing that there's joy in doing our duty, "nothing better than that man should rejoice in his works." On Rosh Hashanah we ask God for "a year of happiness," a shanah tova. The Zohar insists "in God's service there is no room for sadness."

- Most work's a bore.

Mine's not, at least most of the time, although every task has routines.

- People work because they have to, not because they want to.

Rabbinic culture tries to heighten our appreciation of often taken-for-granted pleasures and experiences. There was a blessing for each meal, each meeting, each day, each drink, on seeing a beautiful view or a beautiful woman. No satisfaction was to be taken for granted. Happy occasions were not to be piled on top of each other and gulped down, but separated so that each could be separately savored. The Hasidim insisted that it is a mitzvah to banish sadness, "for a heavy spirit causes a narrowing of the spirit," which in turn makes it difficult to love God.

- You can't order away depression.

Happiness is an art and, like all arts, success is never guaranteed and requires practice and judgment. Happiness begins when we accept that life, though it does not have conclusions, does have satisfying moments and fulfilling experiences, and that these are, after all, enough - at least that's the traditional Jewish view. Happiness is a mood, an openness to certain feelings which we develop when we accept life - God's gift to us - for what it is, a short but potentially exciting passage between the dependency of infancy and the dependency of age. The deepest joys are not the unexpected happenings which dissipate as quickly as they come but the day-to-day knowledge that we're where we ought to be, doing what we ought to be doing for and with those we care about.

to believe in some implacable destiny but in the possibilities of human life and my life, "choose life".

- You've been talking of a world which is always full of problems. What about the messiah? Has he really gone the way of so many once churched ideas?

It seems to me that the idea of a supernatural messiah has run its course. I'm convinced that if we don't handle our problems no one else will.

- Not even God?

God will strengthen our hands, encourage us, remind us that it's possible to avoid a nuclear war, but He won't do it for us. S. Y. Agnon, Israel's premier folklorist, tells a wonderful story about a farmer who herded goats and who became fascinated by an old buck who took to wandering off, sometimes for days, and always returned sporting a wonderfully glossy coat and looking well fed. Puzzled, the farmer told his son to trail the animal. The boy followed the goat across the valley, up a mountain slope, deep into a cave, and through a narrow slit in the cave's back wall. He found himself in Paradise. As you'd expect, he found everything idyllic and he looked around while the goat grazed contentedly. There was only one thing to do. He would return home and bring back his father. Why farm when Paradise is within a day's walk? But when he tried to slide back through the slit in the rock he could not make it so he wrote his father a note which he tied to the goat's horn. In it he told his father to follow the goat as he had done and he'd be led into Paradise. When the farmer saw the buck return without the boy anger and fear seized him, he cursed the goat as a devil and killed it with a single blow. Only then did he notice the note tied to its horn.

- Can we manage?

In modern times a secularized version of the messiah idea emerged. Mankind would be its own messiah. Our own efforts could and would bring about a Messianic Age. The going would be rough at times and exhausting, but progress was taken for granted, and people were confident that some day humanity would build its own Paradise.

- What's knowledge got to do with it?

We have to know when enough is enough, when it's time to work and time to rest, when we should follow one road and not another.

- My brother couldl use some happiness lessons. He lost his kids in a messy divorce. After working for years for a company he was told one Friday that the company had been sold and he was out of a job. Now he's drawn a wall around himself.

He deserves our sympathy, but he must sense that it's wrong to run up the white flag before we have to. We all get our knocks and if Judaism has any sermon which it preaches over and over to us it's "choose life", don't turn our back on life. Don't be afraid to open yourself up.

- How many times can you take a beating?

I don't know, but I know we have to keep trying. I can't imagine anything worse than saying Kaddish for yourself when you're still alive.

- What would you advise my brother?

I'd give him as a mantra from the Zohar, "There's no day without its night and no night without its day." Stay open. Situations change. I'd talk to him of the joy of being alive in God's world and try to put him in the way of some pleasurable experiences.

- Everything we do ends up as so much dust.

But you can't take away from the feelings I've shared or the fulfillment and elation I've known from time to time. I call myself a "Despairing Optimist", a phrase I borrowed from Rene Dubose who used it to title a regular column in The American Scholar. I simply cannot, will not, sit back and say: 'I'm not going to be a good husband, father, or citizen because there's a good chance whatever I do will be wiped out.' I believe that to stay human I need to keep on working for a better world despite the possibility that I may be building on quicksand - despite the suspicion that someone may push the red button which would trigger a nuclear war. Faith helps, at least our faith does. I was never taught

- I believe in progress. We're no longer cave men. We've increased the food supply and the life span. There's nothing we won't some day be able to do. Look at all our computers, robots and miracle drugs. There'll soon be a cure for cancer and a way to control the aging process.

But no cure for all the conflicting moods of our nature. We can increase the yield of grain per acre, develop new sources of power, limit the disabilities of age - but we can't turn ourselves into angels.

- We can certainly do better for the hundreds of millions who are still caught in the grip of ignorance and poverty.

We must try, but even as we do, remember that every problem we resolve only throws up new problems. The only final solution is the grave. Progress comes at a cost. Change coal for oil and you may melt the ice cap. Use nuclear fuel instead of oil and coal and you risk radioactive contamination. Continue to use oil and the world will run out of energy. Every accomplishment raises new problems and requires certain tradeoffs. The higher a country's standard of living, the higher the expectation of the community. The eye is never satisfied with seeing, that's why there will never be a Messianic Age. There's no top, only the climb.

- Give me some hope.

Join the trek.

- What will that do for me?

You'll be part of a great adventure and even if you only make it to a base camp, you'll have had an exciting and rewarding experience.

- You're not offering me as much as your competition.

Which competition?

- Marx and Mao promise me that history is governed by iron laws which guarantee that a liberated mankind will reach the top. The dictatorship of the proletariat is inevitable. They guarantee a vision - a just and peaceful world, or-

ganized by straight-backed, clear-thinking, clear-minded worker citizens who will live openly and cooperatively as class-bound institutions wither away.

I think George Bernard Shaw came closer to the truth: revolutions never lighten the burden of tyranny, they merely shift it from one shoulder to another.

- Rabbi, what do you really offer?

The messianic journey. It is possible to live with meaning and joy in a world without conclusion. Living itself is a joy, particularly if you commit yourself to high ideals and grand values. I'm happy in the work I do when that work is worth doing; in love and in friendship when those I love are open to me; when I give myself over to experiences which touch my soul and satisfy my spirit. Whenever we face challenges worthy of us; do something for another selflessly; involve ourselves with some undertaking that is not self-serving; give of ourselves to those who need us; align ourselves with a useful cause - at that moment we are on the messianic journey, moving like our fathers toward a Promised Land. And there are delicious moments along the way. I've known them and I trust you have, too.

- Sometime ago I sat next to a man on a plane who had worked for fifteen years on a research project he'd never been able to complete. I don't know why he unburdened to me. I was a total stranger, but I won't forget his calm. There was no self-pity. "There are bad moments, but not as much as I thought there would be. I'm satisfied that every lead I pursued will save someone else from turning into that dead end. I won't win a Nobel Prize, but I've helped, and most mornings I enjoyed going to the laboratory. There was excitement in what I was doing.

He's my kind of man. He's savored the joy of the road.

- There's pleasure in less significant activities. I enjoy my stamp collection, playing softball, listening to records. I don't do these things for any serious purpose, yet, I don't consider these activities trivial.

Neither do I. The Sabbath is, among other things, a sign that part of life is to be spent on ourselves. God didn't create us to be drone bees whose whole

life is devoted to the service of the hive. Human beings need to be both careful and carefree.

- And caring.

The bell's rung and I send them into lunch with the quote: "Eat your bread with joy, drink your wine with a merry heart." Audible groans accompanied our breaking up.

Chapter 13

THE PROMISE OF LAND

The Sunday paper had carried a detailed account on yet another General Assembly debate over the West Bank which, as always, was less a debate on the merits of the issues than an orchestrated anti-Israel diatribe. We talked about Israel and the United Nations and then the conversation shifted to the broader question of what the Jewish State means to Jews and why many Christians have trouble understanding our feelings.

- They feel at home wherever they are. Their religion never talks about going back home.

- It's also their holy land. Their history began there, too.

Actually, it didn't. Christian history, and ours, began in Syria, Paul's home and Abraham's.

- You're quibbling.

I'm making the point that we don't feel as we do about Israel because it's the location of ancient ruins where King David or Jeremiah once lived. For us Israel is not simply the Bible land where it all began but the national home of our people, the Promised Land which God selected for us as a homeland. God commanded Abraham to go to the land "that I will show you." God ordered Moses to lead the tribes back to the land He had promised Abraham. Centuries later, Deutero-Isaiah brought an oracle promising the exiles in Babylon that God would return them to Jerusalem. Israel remains in our myths the Promised homeland. It's here that the messianic drama will be played out.

- You said you didn't believe in a messiah.

I don't, but a major part of our people's redemptive hopes focus on the Promised Land. The messiah will appear in Jerusalem. Here is where resurrection will take place. Ever since the destruction of The Temple by the Romans Jews have accepted the idea that they lived in <u>galut</u>, exile, a condition of alienation

which would be ended when God brought them back to Zion. For centuries Jews believed a messiah would accomplish their return. In recent times the Zionists decided Jews could go out on their own and set out "to be a free people in our own land", as their new hymn Hatikvah put it.

- And the Christian hope?

Christianity began as a promise of salvation in the afterlife offered to people of many nations. Christianity relates alienation not to the loss of national sovereignty but to original sin. It teaches that redemption consists in accepting a Christ, a Saviour, who died to cancel out that sin. Those who accept the Saviour will know God's favor and spend eternity in Heaven. Classic Christianity emphasizes a spiritual redemption whose benefit is fully realized in Heaven; while rabbinic Judaism contains many similar elements but also emphasizes a down-on-earth redemption whose centerpiece is the Jewish people secure and at peace in Zion.

- What about Jesus' Second Coming? Isn't that a time much like our Messianic Age, a time when peace, prosperity and justice will envelop the world?

Yes, but except in the very early years the Second Coming was a secondary theme. The emphasis was on the sacraments which provide the keys to the kingdom. The Christian hope focused rather more on the heavenly Jerusalem which Jews prayed "next year in (the real) Jerusalem."

- Christians care as much as we do about the problems of the world and work as hard as we do to improve them. I've a minister friend who's quite a political activist and his church is always busy organizing to pass welfare levies or for a peace march.

Christianity has changed over the centuries just as Judaism has. The early Christians were millenarians who believed that the world was coming to an end. Since Judgment Day was near at hand, there was no point in struggling for social

and political reform. When the world didn't end, Christian teachers changed directions a bit and talked more about the redmptive value of faith in a Saviour. The promise was to the individual. One gained Heaven through faith, by remaining constant despite life's trials. Many Christian thinkers separated Caesar's concerns, practical politics, from theirs, the care of man's immortal soul. Medieval Christianity did not encourage the idea that human beings could create a just and stable society on earth. People were told to endure, to have faith, rather than to commit themselves to social or political reform. They would be repaid for their pains in Heaven.

- What about my minister friend and what he calls the Christian social gospel?

He's a new breed. As Western man became more conscious of his power and achievement, he lost the sense of impotence which had for so long dominated his soul and began to feel that he could do something about the dismal economic and political conditions under which he lived. Churchmen, too, sensed the new spirit and increasing numbers began to formulate a new Christian synthesis which gave importance to our role as a partner with God in creating a decent life for all.

- You said that Christianity's efforts didn't focus on place. What about Jonathan Edwards' city on a hill or Calvin's Geneva?

Edwards tried to create a model community and Calvin a righteous community in New England. The places they chose had no previous emotional connection with Christianity. They might have chosen anywhere. For Jews Zion described a specific place, Palestine. Early in this century the British government offered the Zionists Uganda as a national homeland. They refused the offer. Uganda was not Zion and so couldn't unleash our people's spiritual and pioneering energies.

- When I went to The Wall for the first time I suddenly remembered my grandfather saying with a catch in his voice at the end of each Seder, "next year in Jerusalem."

Our attitude toward the Wall makes my point that the hope of redemption rather than historical association determines our attitudes toward Israel. As a wall this pile of stone has little particular beauty nor is it associated with any great Biblical personage. It was originally a buttressing wall raised to permit an enlargement of the plaza on which The Temple was built. We owe a significant part of this particular section to a rather despicable, petty tyrant and Roman puppet, Herod, who suffered from a Napoleonic edifice complex. But the Wall draws Jews because it is all that remains of The Temple compound and The Temple's past and its association with redemption are powerful myths which continue to hold us in their thrall. A few hundred paces south and east of the Wall, in the Valley of Kidron, lie the ruins of the actual walls of David's city. If historical associations were the key to our Zionism, everyone would visit David's city, but hardly anyone does. David's city, despite David's importance, remains an unvisited ruin. The Wall, despite Herod's bad repute, draws us because it allows us to feel part of Israel's continuing and mysterious relationship with God.

- That explains a conversation I had with the old man, a pious Jew, who was active in all the Zionist groups in town. In 1968, after Jerusalem was reunited, I tried to get him to go and visit the Old City. He said he was now too old to travel that far. Was he disappointed? A bit, but he'd get there, if not in this life then in the next. He talked to me of the lessons he had learned in heder where the rebbe had taught him that the resurrection of the dead would take place on Mt. Zion.

The old myths were old. The first Zionists were non-believers - young radicals. They didn't settle in Palestine because of a messiah they didn't believe in.

- They were more caught up in the myth than they knew. We all are. I told you that in 1901 the British government offered Theodore Herzl Uganda as a national home and the Zionist Congress refused the offer. The diaries and letters of the early pioneers make it clear that they expected Israel not to be just another

nation-state place, Zion. They secularized the old myths but did not deny them. They even used the old rabbinic term, aliyah, going up, Jerusalem is on top of the Judean hills, to describe the decision to immigrate and settle.

- You've been saying that history never stops, that utopia is no place. The idea of a Promised Land seems to me a static theme. It suggests to me that here's the place where we're meant to be and all will be well. The Promised Land sounds suspiciously like the boy and his goat you told us about yesterday.

Our myths did not promise ease in Zion. Entrance into the Promised Land under Joshua marked the beginning of centuries of hard work as the Israelites attempted to conquer the land, protect it from enemies, secure its fertility, and establish prosperous communities. The land was a hard and unyielding place, not a fairy land; cultivable but not magically fertile; home, but not necessarily habitable. Nineteen forty-eight represents a beginning, not a conclusion.

- What about all the milk and honey the Bible talks about?

Understandable hyperbole. The thick forests and cultivable fields of Canaan must have looked like heaven to people who had spent their lives in the dry and rocky wilderness.

Didn't God promise Abraham that this land would belong forever to his descendants?

So He did, but He didn't promise them the right of permanent settlement. They had to be worthy of the land. The national home was private property, God's. Boundary stones were to be raised and respected, but they established only a conditional title. Rent was paid to God in the form of tithes which were used for welfare purposes and the upkeep of the sanctuary. Torah lists God's careful and detailed instructions to Israel about the obligations of tenancy. The land was to lie fallow each seventh year. Trees were not to be cut down for battering rams or scaling ladders. Every city was to have a system of courts and provide

support for the poor. Citizens were to conduct themselves properly at all times. These terms were written into the lease, the covenant, and failure to live up to them could lead to temporary eviction. According to our understanding of history, God exercised this clause twice: in 586 B.C.E. when Jerusalem was destroyed by the Babylonians, and in 70 C.E. when the city was captured and razed by the Romans.

- God's a more forgiving landlord than I would be. If I had a bad tenant I'd evict him and find another.

Then let's be thankful you're not God. God did not strip His people of the right of tenancy, though he threw them out until they were ready to take proper care of the property. Teshuvah, the Hebrew word for repentance, comes from a verb, shuv, which implies both contrition, a change of heart, and the physical act of returning to one's place. Among the exiles, after The Temples were destroyed, it was an article of faith that the nation's spiritual renewal would eventually lead to the longed-for homecoming. Nineteen forty-eight was important because it proved that the long-held faith had not been misplaced.

Nineteen forty-eight had nothing to do with faith. Israel exists because of international politics, a U.N. vote, and the courage of the Haganah.

That's the realistic view. Our prophets, however, insisted that a nation's destiny depends on the quality of the community's obedience to covenant terms rather than on military or political power.

- Nonsense. Virtue never stopped a tank.

Nations rot from within. Rome had lost its elan long before the barbarian tribes breached her frontiers.

- The stained glass windows in our sanctuary carry Biblical phrases. One fits what you've been saying: "Not by power nor by might, but by My spirit." The older I get the more troubling this idea becomes. Tanks and F-16's aren't everything. We lost out in Vietnam despite our superior equipment because we

didn't have our heart in it; but the "not by power" sentence is categorical and power does corrupt. Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Poland remain Soviet colonies.

The phrase was spoken by the prophet Zechariah as part of a warning to the first returnees from the Babylonian Exile that they must be patient with limited rights in Jerusalem and not attempt to assert by force their independence from Persian authority. It said: if you try, you'll be beaten, so 'be patient, have faith.'

- Out of context it says something quite different.

Many find comfort in this bold thought. Given the lethal technology we possess, many are frightened, and with good reason, of the national power policies. War is no longer, if it ever really was, an acceptable extension of politics and Zechariah's phrase voices their frustrations and their hope that some radically new approach will be attempted.

- If the State of Israel followed Zechariah's advice there would be no state.

The other side of the coin is that having become, out of necessity, a military power Israel finds itself trapped in all the moral contradictions that power entails. Weapons defend and, as we saw in Lebanon, weapons kill. One of the problems the existence of Israel presents to many sensitive and liberal Jews is that government policies cannot escape the corruptions and contradictions of power. When is a raid or an nuclear reactor justified? What freedom can be given to trust Bank Arabs, many of whom may be security risks? It's no longer so easy for us to be hot angels and our myth of Zion as a special nation has been scarred by the inevitable compromising with moral principle that the government, like any government, has had to make.

The kibbutzim, the Green Line, and the integration of two million refugees are remarkable achievements, but I hated the pictures of the Air Force bombing West Beirut. I don't like to think of Jews as an occupying power. I want us to be the world's peacemakers.

- Israel should do what it can to advance justice and peace, but there must be reciprocity. Israel can't do it alone.

- I wish Israel wouldn't retaliate as she often does.

The holy war the Arab world proclaimed in 1948 hasn't been abandoned. Israel has been since then under the equivalent of permanent seige. At some point you have to use force to defend yourself.

- Violence always leads to more violence.

Passivity encourages the blood lust.

- What about Ghandi?

The British were already questioning the value of India to them and they had a history of fair play. Arab opposition has been adamant. It's based on theology - lands which are once Muslim-controlled must remain under that control - and on precedent - the Crusaders were finally driven out of the Middle East.

- Sometimes we talk and act as if the whole world's against us.

During World War II the Allies refused to bomb the rail lines into Auschwitz though our planes flew regular missions overhead; England kept Palestine's doors shut to refugees, and our own country organized sham refugee conferences. It takes an act of faith to feel that it would be any different another time around. The last decade has seen most Western European nations welcome officials of the PLO and promote peace plans which involved Israel's giving and the Arabs' taking.

- I know that if we don't stand up for our rights no one else will, but I hate bloodshed. War never settles anything. I like the prayer which says: "enable Israel to be a messenger of peace unto the peoples of the earth.".

- Israel has been involved in five wars. How many do there have to be?

I don't know. The problem si that the other side thinks it is fighting a holy war.

- Will it ever end?

- France and Germany fought three times in less than a century and now, thirty years later, they're allies in the Common Market.

- I'm not a pacifist. I've been proud of the courage and skill of the I.D.F. I responded to the raid on Entebee and to the surgical destruction of Iraq's nuclear generation. The first saved lives, the second will save lives; but Masada troubles me; defense is one thing, a cult of military daring another.

- I climbed Masada. It was a broiling summer day and no one else was there. I've never been so alone and in the middle of such palpable silence. On the top I thought of all the centuries Israel has been alone in just this way. It may be a bit sad, but it's not surprising that a beleaguered community should be showing some signs of seige mentality.

- They ought to get over it. The world has changed.

I agree, but not because the world has changed, it hasn't, but because the sense of being beleaguered deadens the spirit. Our command from God is to "choose life", not to build a shell around our spirits out of fear that every hand is raised against us.

- It sometimes seems that way. Look at those lopsided votes in the United Nations. Zionism is the only liberation movement which has been officially condemned.

If choosing life were easy God wouldn't have had to make such a thing about it.

- Help me out. Jews care deeply about Israel but some call themselves Zionists and others don't. I can't get a handle on the distinctions which are being suggested.

- Zionists believe that it's each Jew's duty to settle in Israel.

I call myself a Zionist, but I don't intend to settle in Israel. I look on aliyah as a privilege, not an obligation. As a Zionist I believe that Israel needs the diaspora and we need Israel. Two are stronger than one, and it's good for us to have and share different perspectives on the problems of Jewish life. A person with one eye lacks depth perception.

was a Jewish State.

- I don't believe in the nation state. People should be loyal to humanity, not to governments. Zionism troubles me because it promotes nationalism.

Nationalism has been, and clearly still is, an important and apparently unavoidable way station peoples pass through as they move from cultural isolation and tribal and caste relationships into some more international form of political life.

- Nationalism breeds suspicion and war.

The ties of common language, history and culture are essential to our identity. We need roots and a state provides these. We need to share our feelings and hopes with those whose culture is our own, and the nation-state provides the means. Jingoism is one side of nationalism, but community is the other.

- Since Vietnam I don't trust any government, including my own. Governments are run by governors who, to a large degree, only serve themselves.

You may not like nations, but all political plans are doomed which do not pay attention to national groupings. Americans were slow to learn this lesson because of the wide open spaces and prosperity. We thought all the immigrants would forget their origin and America would be a melting pot, but, as we've seen, ethnicity hasn't disappeared. Peoples don't give up their histories.

You described Zionism as a program of national renewal. I can't see that people change just by being in a state of their'own.

But they do. Being outcasts and pariahs for so long had done some ugly things to the Jewish spirit. The ghetto was a slum. Suffering was endemic, so much so that many had come to accept it. Many Jews were idle, never having been able to earn a living, and too shrewd by far, having had to use their wits just to stay alive. Many cringed when a muzhik walked by. Zionism was a program designed to rnew the Jewish spirit.

- Then define Zionism.

Zionism is a liberation movement organized by Jews who believe that the renewal of Jewish life, their lives, requires the renewal of the Promised Land as a national home for the Jewish people. Jews in the diaspora have led a marginal existence and Zionists believe that we can develop our cultural heritage naturally and find a place of our own.

- It's hard to see why anyone would oppose this idea, but many did. Why?

There were traditionalists who were convinced that state building was properly the messiah's work, not ours. Some emancipated Jews were afraid that the existence of a Jewish state would give local anti-semites the excuse to say, 'go home, we don't want you here.' Zionists didn't trust emancipation. They did not deny that changes had taken place, but they doubted they would solve the Jewish problem. When Napoleon conquered Europe he enforced throughout the continent many of the ideas of the French Revolution, including the emancipation of Jews, but as soon as Napoleon was defeated the German states locked their Jews up again. Emancipated Jews could now do many things that they had not been allowed to do before, but if the ghetto was gone all kinds of academic and employment quotas had risen in its place. In Europe,the Zionists were convinced, the Jew would never escape anti-semitism.

- I once did a paper on Theodor Herzl. Herzl was in Paris at the time of the Dreyfus Trial and as he watched this blatantly anti-semitic show trial and the attendant mob hysteria, he suddenly realized that Europe's endemic racism was of such virulence that Jews would never be secure. Parties on the Right accused Jews of spreading the cosmopolitan and subversive ideas which undermined patriotism. Leftist parties attacked Jewish clannishness which, they said, made Jews unassimilable. Herzl didn't know the term, but he recognized a Catch-22 situation when he saw it. If Jews assimilated and advanced politically and socially, they incited envy. If they failed to Westernize and remained outsiders, they were villified as aliens and subversives. The only solution in his mind

- If the Torah tradition provided sound ideas, structures and hopes why were these intensely Jewish communities full of stunted and dispirited people? It would appear that Judaism didn't do what you said it could and should do.

More was being asked of Torah than any religious culture can provide. Our way of life prevented the total disintegration of personality and community under the most appalling and unremitting pressures. One of the Zionists' rallying cries was that the Jew had to be gotten out of Europe so Europe could be gotten out of the Jew and Jews could begin to live naturally with the heritage.

- How would being in Israel effect these changes?

The Zionists counted on the cleansing power of a healthy and national culture: Hebrew instead of Yiddish; work with the hoe and spade as well as the pen; new heroes, the Maccabees and Biblical soldiers and farmers to complement the model of a scholar bent over out-of-date books. Different thinkers had different programs - most of them versions of then popular philosophies of human renewal. A. D. Gordon, taking his lead from Tolstoy, said to the Jew: "The sweat of honest labor will remove the corruption of the city. Labor is our cure. Go on the land. Work with your hands. The sun and sweat will leach out of your bodies the poisons of the ghetto." Socialists like Ben Zvi and Borochov spoke eloquently of the benefits of true community and the healthy environment of a fully communal experience like the kibbutz where labor and benefits are shared. Writers like Ahad Ha-Am sounded like John Dewey when they spoke of a national cultural and academic center whose creative activities would unlock the spiritual energies of an historically creative people and make possible Judaism's free and distinctive development in a context entirely its own.

- What's Jewish in all this?

Everything and nothing. These thinkers took ideas from other cultures, but bound those themes to native traditions. Gordon took the term avodah, which had long signified the act of worship, liturgy, and returned it to its original

meaning, work; work as worship. Borochov read Amos's attack on the perversities of the wealthy and the evil of economic and social privilege as fundamental socialist thinking. Many of the utopian and reformist ideas which circulated in Europe seemed to be natural extensions of the social and economic justic themes which occupied a significant place in Jewish thought.

- I thought that Israel was created so that the refugees from Hitler's Germany would have a place to go.

Herzl died a half century before Hitler came to power.

- Why didn't Europe's Jew come here? Until 1924 America had no immigration quotas.

Many came until 1924 America passed strict immigration laws. Most of Europe's Jews chose the promise of America over the hardship of Palestine. The Zionists went against the current because they feared that wherever the Jew went, unless he went to his own country, he would ultimately face anti-semitism and be treated as an outsider.

- Not true.

- Not true here, at least for now; but certainly true in countries like South Africa, Argentina and Mexico where many European Jews settled.

- Are you a Zionist?

If you're asking whether I believe anti-semitism will become a major social and political fact in American life, I don't know. It depends on many factors, not the least of which is economic. When times get bad a society looks for scapegoats. Will we be that scapegoat again? I don't know. In many ways the United States is unique. We escaped the unhappy medieval conditioning which poisoned Europe. In Europe we were the only non-Christians. Here there are many minority groups, many potential scapegoats. A few years ago the KKK found it had so many enemies on its hit list, it had to delist the Catholics.

- So what do you mean when you call yourself a Zionist?

First that I believe Jews must not let their fate depend on anyone's good will. Great Britain closed the doors to Palestine precisely when Europe's Jews most desperately needed a haven, and the United States organized refugee conferences which were designed to be without result. Second, that prejudice is not necessarily a thing of the past and that the existence of a national home where Jews can always come is a welcome element in the survival agenda of the world Jewish community. The key positive element in my Zionism is my conviction that the existence of a Jewish state is an essential element in the renewal and continuing development of the Jewish spirit. It seems to me essential in our changeful times for Jewish life to express itself in all the forms of social and cultural activity as well as religion, and this kind of full-bodied development can take place only where Jewish civilization is not limited to a few social agencies and the synagogue.

- Zionism also means the West Bank settlements, an occupying army, the bombing of Beirut and a massive defense budget.

Israel has been invaded four times, yet survives. Energy and resource have had to be diverted to defense. Political mistakes have been made; yet, few other nations have so transformed and improved their environment. Most Israelis came as refugees, but in Israel there are no refugees. Israel's social services are studied and serve as useful and successful models to many peoples. These achievements remain compelling and, given the circumstances, are really quite remarkable.

- You've not answered my question.

The defense budget is a necessity. At times I've felt Israel over-reacted, but let the country that is without sin throw the first stone. If the Arab states had accepted the United Nations partition resolution in 1947, a Palestinian

State would be celebrating today well over thirty years of independence.

- It's not only the bombing raids and settlements' it's religious coercion of Jews by Jews. As a Reform rabbi you couldn't officiate at a marriage in Jerusalem.

Israel isn't Zion, but I'm encouraged that many in Israel want it to be. Israel is a vibrant democracy. Tens of thousands rally against certain West Bank policies. There's a strong civil rights movement. An Israeli friend who is often critical of government policies always quotes Martin Buber that "this land is not merely the land of special favor, it is also the land of special work." That's the challenge, isn't it?

- But they're so far from meeting it.

- What country isn't? Our own country last year sold more arms abroad than all the rest of the world. Given the unremitting pressures of the last decades, Israel's record isn't shamed at all.

Chapter 14

WHAT SHOULD I DO?

It was a rainy Monday. The TV was on and a few of the group had been watching a soap opera. In the episode a father returns home after a visit to his daughter and describes to a friend her determinedly unconventional life. We heard him say, "either the whole world is crazy or I am."

- When my father finishes reading the morning newspaper, he shakes his head and says: "No one seems to know what's right anymore."

The phrase rang a bell. I'd heard it a few weeks before in my office from the lips of an anxious and obviously bewildered woman. Her son had been badgering her because she contributed regularly to the United Way and other charities she considered worthwhile. Private welfare programs, he claimed, were band-aids that covered over festering social ills without curing them and so delayed the radical political and economic surgery America needed.

Her daughter's recent visit had proved difficult. She was living with another graduate student. They had a genuine relationship, she had told her mother, but they were not about to be married. Marriage would compromise the purity of their love.

After twenty years of marriage her brother and sister-in-law had filed for divorce. They remained the best of friends, her brother had told her, but needed a fresh start, and since they weren't getting any younger, the sooner the better.

The night before she came to my office her husband had come home and told her to pack their bags. They were going to take a long trip. He was sick to death of the hassle with clients, government forms, and union negotiations. His partner could take over the business. Whatever they could get out of it, so be it. He wanted to see the country while he could still enjoy the trip. Maybe they would end up living in California. She paused. She seemed whipped. "I just don't know what's right anymore."

- Her problem is that she's old-fashioned. We've liberated ourselves from all ideas about absolute standards. Times change. Values change. What matters is that we feel right about what we do.

- And that nobody gets hurt.

Can there be community or family without shared goals and values? Recently an elderly woman came to me with a bitter complaint about her daughter and son-in-law. They wanted her to move into a nursing home. She felt betrayed and abandoned. She had been raised in an era when only the impoverished or unwanted were institutionalized. "Don't my children know the Ten Commandments: 'honor your father and your mother'? How can they do this to me?" I asked her children to stop by. They did so one evening since both of them worked. They could not afford a full-time housekeeper to look after a mother who couldn't drive and sometimes forgot to turn off the stove. They had thoroughly investigated available locations and had found a first-rate facility. "She will be well cared for. We'll be there often. We have no other choice." A day or two later I received an angry telephone call from a granddaughter who lived out of town. "How could they put nanna in a home? Institutions dehumanize. Nanna will become a chart. She's a wonderful person. How could they do this to her?"

- Everybody's got a right to his opinion.

Agreed, but if we don't share basic goals and values what will hold our relationship together?

- Love.

How long can love survive the frustration of daily misunderstandings?

- We live in a free society. Everyone thinks his thoughts, votes as he pleases, and does his thing. It's worked.

A majority of those who settled here had left Europe for many of the same

reasons and shared a community of interests. That's why there's a traditional American civic religion.

- It didn't always work. Look at the Civil War.

- And the growth of single issue and ethnic politics.

My point exactly. Countries fall apart when each group insists on its way. I often worry that we're in a falling apart phase.

- Nothing is more important than freedom. I won't be regimented.

There's a world of difference between regimentation, forced obedience to arbitrary standards, and consensus, what the eighteenth century called a social compact.

- A few years ago my parents and I went fifteen rounds on whether I should stay in school and get my professional degree or drop out for awhile and live. I said I didn't want to spend my best years in school. My parents said that if I dropped out I'd get out of the study habit and never go back.

You haven't gone back, have you?

I found I didn't want to be a lawyer. I want to write.

And?

- Nothing published, but I'm trying.

And your parents?

They still don't understand, but they help out with the rent. They've said families must hold together.

- My family's o.k., but we're not tight. I'm closer with friends than family.

- I'll feel lucky if I have a handful of real friends in my lifetime. Most so-called friends are simply companions who happen to be around and with whom I like to do things. If they moved out of town tomorrow we'd exchange New Year's cards and call each other up when we were passing through.

- You have to work at relationships.

The Bible says, "Honor your father and mother", not love your parents. Love is a natural feeling. Honor involves care and courtesy. It's the Bible's

way of saying we have to work at the relationships which are important to us.

- I'm not confused about family or ethics. I know what's right. Family is right. Peace is right. War is wrong.

Are all wars wrong? If you were Israel would you make peace with the Arabs at any price?

- I won't play that game. Words can be twisted any way.

Haven't you ever regretted a judgment?

- I've been wrong sometimes, but my conscience is clear.

- Most people I know have convenient consciences. They listen to it when they want to. Besides, conscience is an uncertain guide. A Muslim may be guilt-ridden because he takes a drink, an Indian suffers whenever he eats meat. Our conscience reflects our culture.

- What's your point?

Conscience is a protean capacity which has no chance to be effective unless it is carefully programmed. That's why rabbinic Judaism took such pains to create an all-encompassing and ethically principled way of life. Our religious culture had moral conditioning as its primary goal.

- I don't believe in standardized rules.

No two situations are exactly alike, but I believe there are fundamental moral standards and specific situations which we face which can be applied sensitively and imaginatively to the instance. I often tell the story of the rebbe who was appointed to head a community council and told that his first task would be to prepare a new constitution for his city. It took him only a few minutes. He handed the council a copy of the Ten Commandments. He wasn't being flip, but he was making the point that once we agree on fundamentals, specific procedures and decisions can be arrived at.

- You're contradicting yourself. You've been describing Judaism as a process, now you're defending fixed and static standards.

I'm defending the original moral commitment. We are to do what is right, not what is best for us or most satisfying to us. To determine his ship's position the navigator needs a fixed point. The North Star is always there, but each ship sails on its own voyage. We need a starting point, certain axioms, in order to be able to think. Judaism has always known this, that's the idea behind the myth that commandments were given to us on Mt. Sinai.

- The tablets on which Moses inscribed the law were made of stone. The myth tries to make the point that these rules are fixed for all times, but I don't believe even the Ten Commandments are everywhere and always valid and neither do you.

- As you know, I'm one of your old Confirmation students and I remember a discussion you had with us where you asked us to suggest a situation in which it would be right to break each of the Ten Commandments. You said that if you were a fugitive fleeing the Nazis you'd steal to survive or even murder if an SS trooper stood between you and freedom.

I also said that I was not making a particularly radical change. Despite their belief in the Commandments as God's immutable word, the rabbis taught that there are instances when to serve God we should set aside the Torah's rules. To save a life you are to break the Sabbath prohibitions. As I said earlier, the immutable Torah was not the naked text but the text as interpreted by centuries of faith and need. Anachronistic statements were honored by inattention or reinterpretation. Capital punishment was effectively abolished by judicial process. The prerogatives of the priestly class were reduced to empty honors. .

- On whose authority?

The Torah's, or so the sages believed. They interpreted individual texts through the spirit of the whole text. You can see this in any number of their interpretive principles: the law was given to man to live by it, not to die by it,' 'The Sabbath was given to man, not man to the Sabbath,' 'would that they

might forsake Me if it means keeping faith with the Torah.' One of my favorite Talmudic passages deals with the rules of fasting on Yom Kippur. "If, on Yom Kippur, a pregnant woman smells some food and conceives a great craving for it, she should be given a little until she no longer feels weak or faint. A sick person, too, is fed at the word of the physicians. If no physicians are present one feeds the sick person when he wants it until he says, 'enough. . .'"

- If such, indeed, was their approach why are you and the orthodox so far apart?

Because of a growing sense that the sages of the past had faced every conceivable problem. The sages allowed the river to silt over. Orthodoxy built a dam across the river and said: 'What is, is Judaism.' Liberals have tried to keep the chapel free and insist that our respect for what has been should not limit our work towards shaping the religious approach which needs to be.

- You talk about the Torah having an informing spirit. It seems to me that the Torah assumes a number of values which are sometimes in conflict. Since we've been talking about adjusting the tradition to life, the Torah says also, "you shall not add nor subtract from this statement of the teaching." How can you affirm this statement of an unchanging pattern of life and those quotes you just gave about the necessity of change?"

Let me teach you a Talmudic phrase: Taku. A number of Talmudic debates end with it. Taku indicates that the issue could not be resolved. On complicated moral issues sensitive and experienced people may come to opposite conclusions. One of the reasons Judaism has steered clear of a centralized bureaucracy like the papacy is that decentralization permits the circulation of differing judgments in difficult cases. Debate is not cut short.

- Hard cases make bad law.

- And in such cases lawyers hope the high court will hand down a split decision.

I've made the opposite decision in almost identical situations. In both cases a patient had a fatal illness. The first patient was a man in his middle years. When I entered his room he smiled at me: "Rabbi, I feel better. I know that I am going to be well." Actually, he had only a few weeks to live; yet, here he was, talking about health and going back to work. A lot of thoughts went through my mind before I said: "No, you're not." He was silent. I'd only repeated what the doctor had already told him. We talked. Why had I spoken so openly? This man had a wife, children, a business. He had been suddenly stricken. If he avoided the decisions which needed to be made they would not be made, with unhappy consequences for those who depended on him. However painful it was, he had to face the truth. In a room on the next floor I visited an older woman, also ill with cancer and with a limited time to live. She, too, greeted me with a smile: "I'm beginning to feel a bit better. All this will soon be behind me and I'll be well. I'm looking forward to my granddaughter's wedding." I made no attempt to disabuse her. I was comforting and solicitous. No one depended on her. There were no decisions that she had to make. She did not need to face the added pressure.

- I like the Taku idea. During Carter's presidency his human rights campaign was a frequent subject of dinner table conversation. The inalienable right of every human being to life, liberty, etc. is, obviously, a fundamental principle, but in many countries, particularly in the Third World where the population is largely illiterate and few have any experience with self-government, democracy is not only an alien form of government but may be an unworkable one. To withhold aid, and perhaps recognition, from such countries might be to force their governments to turn for support to the Soviet bloc or so weaken these governments that the military or the undemocratic Left came to power.

The Torah puts it well, "Do not be righteous overmuch."

- I don't believe in compromise. What's right is right.

There is a folk saying that the gates of Heaven are shut to anyone who ends life having spoken only the truth and done only the right. Rigid personalities inevitably do a lot of harm. Remember the incorruptible Robespierre? Compromise is necessary for peaceful and effective progress.

- Why?

In our crowded world, or any social unit,. no one can have it all his way.

- You're using right as a moral standard. Right, at least as I use the term, includes questions of intent and motive. If I feel good about my motives, if my impulses are genuine and loving, then what I do is bound to be right.

Then I would argue, and I think Jewish thought comes down heavily on this point, that good intentions do not establish the goodness of an act. Lenin ordered the death of millions of muzhiks in his belief that only their elimination would permit Communism to flourish in Russia. You can love somebody to death. In the Middle Ages thousands of Jews were forced to convert to Christianity because of the church's loving concern for their immortal souls. There is a mother love which sustains and a mother love which smothers. The Grand Inquisitor sent men to the rack out of his love for their immortal souls. His motives were pure but he literally loved people to death.

- At least when I do what I feel is right I'm not a hypocrite.

God condemned those who "honor Me with its lips but keep their heart from Me," but hypocrisy is not the ultimate sin.

- What is?

- Egotism, selfishness, caring only about yourself.

- Contempt for others.

- Impatience, elbowing others aside because you're in a hurry.

- Singlemindedness.

- Unforgiving hate.

You're right, you're right, and you're right, too. Just as there are many virtues, and not ultimate virtue, so there are many sins and no ultimate sin.

- So how do you decide what is right?

I use a calculus of consequence rather than a calculus of motivation. I accept the moral concerns of our special message and I try to understand how I can most usefully apply these to the issue at hand. I try to maximize benefits and minimize harm. I believe that what flows from a decision is more important than the spirit in which it is taken. I watched the other day as a family pleaded with a physician to do all he could to save their mother, a comatose lady in her eighties, whose brain scan had shown only erratic activity. They spoke out of love but without thought to what would happen if they had their way. The doctor gently advised them to accept what had already happened. He was thinking about what lay ahead. The family could not get beyond their feelings.

- What happened?

They insisted that a dangerous operation be performed and she died on the table.

Judgement requires that we take consequences into account.

- Why?

It may be preferable for one unwed mother to abort a fetus and for another to carry and deliver the child. So much depends on the mother's conditioning, family situation, emotional well-being and self-image. Situations are never identical.

- Even a calculus of consequences needs a base line. Where do you begin?

With the thrust of our tradition which, I believe, represents our perception of God's general concerns. I try to follow God's lead. I look at the specific traditions of our teaching and try to discern the moral concerns implicit in them.

- Be specific.

According to the Torah the community is to impose a tithe and other taxes so that the poor need not beg or depend on the erratic charitable impulse of the well off. Long-term support (kupah) and emergency relief (tamuchui were avail-

able in almost all communities. Given this record, I cannot look, as some do, on welfare-related taxes as depriving me of what is mine; rather, I see them as a valid mechanism for the proper distribution of opportunity and I dismiss as callous all social philosophies which blame the poor for their poverty, and all political theories which deny that the community has a public welfare obligation.

I'll give you other examples. The Torah says, "You shall neither wrong nor oppress a stranger for you were strangers in the land of Egypt." Jewish criminal and civil law treats all peoples in the same way. It follows that "separate but equal" is an unacceptable political form, that the abuse of wetback labor is evil. "You shall not stand idly by the blood of a neighbor." So, I cannot stay in front of my TV set when someone outside calls for help. You shall do no unrighteousness in judgment. When I was foreman of our local Grand Jury I consciously tried to be sensitive to class and culturally skewed attitudes. Why? Because our tradition insists "you shall not respect the person of the poor or favor the person of the powerful." I hear many things in the course of my professional duties, and when people ask about others I remain silent. Why? "You shall not go up and down as a tale bearer among your people." "The seventh day is the Sabbath. In it you shall do no manner of work." Every human being has an inalienable right to use as he wishes some part of his life. Life is to be savoured, not simply endured.

- I visited Eastern Europe last year and I didn't like what I saw. Share the wealth plans tend to be ham-fisted.

When he protested his integrity to his friends, Job cited charity as one of his virtues: "Have I eaten my morsel alone and not fed the orphan from my plate?" According to an old midrash, the friends were impressed, but God was not. "Well and good, but you fell short by half of Abraham's standard. You let the poor come to you. Abraham went out to the roadside to find the hungry and invite them home. You fed them whatever you were serving, Abraham asked them what they would like and fed them whatever they requested."

- You spoke of following God's lead. How can I follow what I can't see or know?

Here is where myth, the imaginative expression of otherwise incommunicable truths, comes to our rescue. At Sinai Moses asked to know something more about God, Himself. God makes it clear that He cannot be seen even by Moses, but He tells Moses to place himself in a cleft in the rock and He will make His glory pass by. Moses does so. God passes behind him and Moses senses something of God's nature: "I the Lord, the Lord God, merciful and gracious, long-suffering and abundant in goodness and truth." This myth which provides us a list of God's attributes was accepted as a meaningful description of God's nature. The list was often quoted in Biblical times. It appears in a number of places in the Tanakh and we repeat it still in our synagogue when the Torah is taken from the Ark. It's our patterning text. Since we "know" that God is good, kind, etc., we know that He wants us to be like Him in these respects.

- God is unknowable.

But this much is known about God.

- Was?

Those who experienced God sense these aspects of his nature. The Talmud commands: "Just as God clothes the naked, attends the sick, comforts the mourners and buries the dead, do you likewise." A student of the times asked your question. How do we know these are God's ways? His teacher responded. The Torah tells us that God clothed Adam and Eve. He visited Abraham when he was sick. He comforted Isaac after his father's death.

I can't believe you credit such nonsense.

Our tradition created a graceful culture out of what you call nonsense. Myth exposes truths grasped by our imaginations and these are the truths which reach deep and on which we gamble everything. I like the comment of a contemporary

writer, Edward Dahlberg: "Man must eat fables or starve his soul to death."

. - I'm not sure I quite appreciate what this myth adds to our ethical approach. The "do's" and "don'ts" can take us only so far. God's qualities obviously represent broad moral concerns, and as we try to weave them into our lives we develop a moral sensitivity which helps us understand how the specific do's and don'ts are to be understood and those others which are required of us but not covered by the 'you shall' and 'you shall not.'

- Monarchy is deep. What we're doing is talking about values and I don't set much store in talk. Most moralists I know don't live up to their sermons. Plato's my favorite example. He goes to great pains in the Dialogues to define the good, but after he published his book he continued to live as before, teaching philosophy to the sons of the well-born. You'd think that someone concerned with ethics would have taken an active political stand against Athenian imperialism or their tolerance of slavery and contempt of foreigners.

Philosophy seems to define. Torah demands. "It has been told you, O man, what is good. And what the Lord demands of you." In Chinese, ethics is written with an ideogram consisting of the shape of a man and the number two. Apparently they meant to suggest in this way that ethics involves action, not analysis, and that we prove our virtue by the quality of our relationships.

Moses said of himself, "I am not a man of words." The Torah does not debate the why and wherefore of God's Instructions. The sages' favorite saying was, "It's the deed, not the analysis, which is central." It is because the deed is the ultimate test that we must think through the consequences of an act before carrying it out. "An impulsive person cannot be a saint."

- Weren't the tribes praised because at Sinai they accepted the covenant before Moses stipulated its terms?

This was our myth's way of saying that certain standards - right must be done - must be accepted as axiomatic. But beyond these the emphasis was on careful and patient applications of these principles to your life. The rabbis developed

a special genre of writing, She'elot u'Teshuvot, Questions and Answers, Responsa, which centered on a careful analysis of individual cases. An interesting case would present itself or someone would pose a specific instance involving moral and legal issues. The rabbi to whom the issue was brought would handle it as best he could and explain his judgment on the basis of relevant Torah principles. If the issues were interesting this did not end the matter. The consulted rabbi would draw up a digest of the problem and circulate this precis and his decision to other authorities for comment. No one expected every scholar to concur with the original judgment.

- It sounds like our process of judicial review.

In many ways it is.

- If the rabbis disagreed how did anyone know who's right?

You didn't. In many cases there is no clear-cut right. The goal was not unanimity but enlightenment, the refinement of a community's moral sensitivity.

- What about Nietsche's idea that the superior person is above the law and can make his own law?

We don't believe anyone is above the law. Israel's king was to write out by hand a Torah scroll as a symbolic act of submission to God's Instructions.

- We've mentioned any number of unacceptable Biblical and rabbinic laws: capital punishment, the segregation of the sexes, the prohibition of most autopsies. Why should a king or anyone else submit to them?

- He shouldn't and we don't. He was to write out the familiar scroll, but his allegiance was to the living Torah. I've suggested to you that when a rule became dysfunctional it was either treated with benign neglect or its purpose was achieved in a more effective way.

- Not always. Orthodox Judaism holds on to the rule that only a mother determines the child's religious status. I have a friend who went to religious school with me and who was confirmed with me, who, if the old-fashioned controlled

all Jewish life, would never have been allowed in our school and so would never have become a rabbi.

There are always won't-let-goers who are afraid of change, but, as I said, the process of breaking open the shells, saving the present from the dead hand of the past, is recognized in the tradition itself as essential.

- The problem is law. Let people be and they'll work things out.

Not always. Communities require structure and law provides that structure.

- So many laws are unjust. They protect privilege or give certain groups unfair advantage.

Admitted. Yet, a society of laws, however imperfect, is to be preferred to anarchy. I'm paraphrasing an old rabbinic text. "If it were not for law men would swallow each other alive." According to Talmudic law, a Jew owes obedience to the law of the country where he resides unless its law requires him to take a life, violate another's person, or publicly disgrace the Torah or the Jewish people.

- Are there no limits? I won't obey a tyrant.

Neither will I. A country ruled by fiat is subject to the ruler's whims; its citizens cannot depend on due process or published laws. When a government is arbitrary and tyrannical we cannot be expected to accept the obligation of obedience.

- What do you mean by "the limits of political reality?"

A medieval Jew who denounced the king's policies, in effect, committed suicide and sometimes endangered his whole community.

- I won't obey any law I don't believe in.

You wouldn't last long in the Soviet Union or Iran. Civil disobedience is an effective political weapon only when it is used against a fairly restrained government.

- If I had been a black in the South I'd have sat down in the front of the bus, but it seems to me that many are too ready to set themselves above the law. Too many of us are hot angels. We've lost all sense of the importance of community.

- I was totally opposed to the war. When I spoke with one rabbi about the possibility of going to Canada he listened sympathetically; another suggested that if I didn't serve, another, probably a poor black man from the urban ghetto, would have to serve in my place. A third was completely unsympathetic and told me that it was my duty to serve. Presumedly, as a Jew I owed this country a special kind of loyalty.

The first rabbi concentrated on your needs; the second tried to make you recognize that moral decision cannot be made in a vacuum, that your clear conscience might cause another to die; the third had made a political judgment about the war different than yours.

- Who was right?

Perhaps all three.

- That can't be.

Why not? Each had approached the problem with a particular set of consequences in mind. Normal judgments are not easy to make and the right is rarely a simple matter.

Chapter 15

IT'S GOOD TO BE A JEW

Bags were packed. It was our last morning. Breakfast had been served, addresses exchanged, and the conversation had become anecdotal. The Institute Director was remembering his youth.

- When I was in college the local Jewish community had an adopt-a-student program which offered us surrogate parents and home-cooked meals on weekends. Jews were the only group on campus who had such ties to the community. I've always looked on the Jewish community as an extended family. A visitor at synagogue will be made welcome and generally offered home hospitality. We always invited out-of-towners and anyone who is alone to our Seder. When the Russian Jews began to arrive they were given jobs and all kinds of help.

During the Korean War I served as a chaplain on the staff of the Comander of our Naval Forces in the Far East. One day a young pilot came to my office to make arrangements for his wedding. He had been flying regularly into Hong Kong where he'd met and fallen in love with a local girl. For various official reasons they had to be married by an American official. We set a noon hour date some weeks ahead. I wanted the occasion to be as warm and as personal as it could be so I asked a young couple who lived on the base if they would arrange a luncheon. They did and over the lunch table the bride and the host discovered they were related, actually second cousins. When the pogroms reached their grandparents' village in White Russia the host's family had fled West while the bride's had crossed Siberia to Manchuria, settled in Harbin, and moved on to Hong Kong when Japan attacked. Neither had known of the other's existence.

- My best friend's father was a child in pre-war Austria. In 1938 when the German invasion seemed inevitable, his parents, desperate to get out, somehow got

hold of a Detroit phone book and wrote to everyone who was listed there under their last name. One man, no relation, sent them the necessary papers, including an affidavit guaranteeing the father's employment. He saved their lives.

_There's a law that Jews must ransom fellow Jews who are being held as slaves. During the Middle Ages Jewish communities from all around the Mediterranean supported an office on the island of Rhodes whose mission was to ransom Jews captured by pirates. The Rhodes was the Mediterranean's busiest slave market. We've always had our share of slaves and refugees - they're still coming out of the U.S.S.R. - and we know we're to help them in any way we can.

- I teach English at night to Russian Jews who've come in the last year or two to our city.

- Can I change the subject? It's our last day and before I lose the chance I want to talk about some private feelings. I've known happy times as a Jew. We always have a Seder and I occasionally go to Sabbath service. I like the sense of being part of a large family. Whenever I travel I visit synagogues, but I never quite feel that I'm doing it right. In college I went to classes on Rosh Hashanah and now I work on the Sabbath. I feel I'm something of a sham and not the real thing.

You're what I call a Rosenzweig Jew.

- A what?

Rosenzweig Jew is my label for those of us who feel vaguely guilty that we're not more observant. Franz Rosenzweig was an interesting writer and philosopher whose spiritual pilgrimage took him from a culturally assimilated German-Jewish home and the serious contemplation of conversion to Christianity into an active Jewish life. His re-entry into Jewish life began just before the first World War. During the 1920's Rosenzweig helped found a rather brilliant adult education academy in Frankfort and published a seminal, and quite original, Jewish apologetic:

The Star of Redemption. During the early stages of his return to Judaism, Rosenzweig observed only a few of the mitzvot. When he was asked why he didn't follow the rest he would answer, 'some day, I'm not yet ready.' He practiced those rites which appealed to him, and he assumed that as time went, and being Jewish became more natural, that he would add more of the tradition. Rosenzweig's definition of Judaism was quite original, but in terms of practice rabbinics remained his standard. I think that most Jews tend to think as he did, but I'd try not to equate Judaism with any particular set of practices. Akiba's practice differed from Amos's, yet, both were good and pious Jews. It's the old business of the river rather than the tree. Many traditional rites appeal to me, but my soul is dead to customs which prohibit instrumental music during Sabbath worship or require the separation of men and women. I'd be embarrassed to turn out my pockets so as to empty my sins into a river and I've not the patience for an interminable service. At the same time, I respond to some recent customs like Consecration and baby naming. When asked when he would become an observant Jew, Rosenzweig answered, 'when I can.' When I'm asked the same question I answer, 'I am an observant Jew. I'm fully committed to Jewish life as I understand it.' The old rule was that only men say Kaddish for dead relatives. I take it for granted that women are persons who grieve as men do and that they should take part in our rites just as men, not only because these rites can be helpful but as a statement of their value as persons and as Jews. I am firmly convinced that as the needs of Jews change the mix of practices must change as well as the meaning ascribed to the familiar forms. So it has been. So it will ever be. Breaking a glass at a wedding may once have frightened away the evil spirits. Today it's simply the first act of a Jewish wedding. Incidentally, I have both the bride and groom break a glass.

- Why?

To take the edge of male chauvinism off the marriage rite.

- Then you don't feel constrained by tradition?

Tradition provides me a basic structure which I try to decorate to my taste and needs.

- I saw you play tennis on Saturday afternoon.

The old Sabbath laws emphasized the No's: No work, no cooking, no travel, rules which made clear its role as a mandatory rest day; but in our world where the forty-hour work week is the norm, the rule, "you shall do no manner of work," doesn't have to be applied so literally. I continue to think of the Sabbath as a day set apart, set apart for all that refreshes my soul, a day to be with family, to worship, rest and relax. All that enhances life is appropriate to Sabbath, including a walk in the woods or a game of tennis.

- Even work?

Yes, even work if your work is a spiritual and intellectual delight. As a rabbi I work on the Sabbath.

- Do you keep kosher?

Not really.

- Don't you feel guilty for abandoning a major part of the tradition?

No.

- Why not?

I eat no pork. We have no shell fish in the house. These practices are my way of keeping in touch with the past and, incidentally, of honoring my parents. This was the way I was brought up, and remains my way of keeping in touch with the complex food code which once governed Jewish life.

- You're not being consistent.

I don't set great store by consistency. Life's too full of zigs and zags.

- How can you have a religion if the rule is everyone makes up his or her own mind?

I'm not saying Judaism is whatever I want it to be. The river flows all around me. Community norms play an important role in defining practice. I

live within the Jewish community. Customs are often maintained in highly original ways. I once saw a fascinating collection of Passover Haggadahs prepared by secular kibbutzim. Many were simply collections of readings on freedom and liberation, but all were intended for Seder night, assumed that everyone was eating matzah, drinking four cups of wine, and singing 'an only kid.' Everyone had a Seder and on the same day.

- You're breaking traditions which have lasted from Sinai.

Few are that old. Yom Kippur didn't become a high holiday until after the Babylonian Exile some eight hundred years after Sinai. Monogamy has been the norm among European Jews for less than a thousand years and polygamy was still permitted in Yemen and other Oriental centers until our generation. The separation of milk and meat and the other dietary laws grew up over time - David didn't keep a kosher palace and Esther didn't eat kosher in Ahasuerus' palace.

- We certainly need some agreement as to the terms of our way of life.

A strong and regular pulse holds us together despite differences in practice and approach. In Cleveland we have a committee which includes the president and rabbi of every synagogue, all of whose members share similar concerns for adequate support for religious education, services to the non-institutionalized elderly, the integration of Russian Jewish immigrants and the elimination of sectarian observances from the public schools. We disagree on some issues. Each congregation has a distinct pattern, but all of us work hard for Israel, Jewish education and the support institutions of our Jewish community.

- On the railroad platform at Auschwitz no one was asked whether they were reform, conservative or orthodox.

- Or not religious at all.

- It's our last session and you're just beginning to open up. I want to know more about you as a Jew. What led you to become a full-time Jew?

I'm afraid you'll not find my testimony particularly dramatic. I didn't have any great spiritual crisis like the one Augustine describes in his Confessions.

When I look back my becoming an active Jew seems no more than the natural unfolding of what was always there and was always meant to be. I grew up in a secure and learned Jewish home. There were books everywhere: in my father's study, in the living room, on the landing of the stairs, even in the basement. These books and the smell of the leather bindings attracted me long before I could read the pages. These were my father's books. He was a wise man and I concluded, without thinking much about it, that the tradition was wise. Years of serious study have confirmed the child's instinctive impression.

Until I was ten or so Judaism meant those books, holidays, Hebrew lessons, and serious discussions among the adults gathered at our table about the rise of Naziism and Zionism. Hitler's picture was frequently in the papers. My grandparents lived in Jerusalem and wrote me from there. Seder meant thirty or forty guests, much moving of furniture, and a dollar if I found the afikomen. A child relates to concrete symbols. Theology came later.

When I was an undergraduate, a roommate and I went at God over a long night. We were angry. It was 1945, the papers had just published pictures of piled-up corpses in the ovens of the death camps. My roommate was angry at God. He was the first person I ever heard use the phrase, God is dead. I didn't blame God. Germans had built Auschwitz, not He. I was angry at the Nazis and a cold-hearted world.

I don't know why, but I've never expected God to answer all my prayers any more than I expected my parents to do whatever I asked. It's enough that He listens. I don't complain much to God, but I need to feel that the Heavens are not shut tight. I grew up during years that were unbelievably hard and cruel for Jews and saw that somehow most kept their faith. Indeed, as I look back now on the thirties they appear not only as a tragic time but as the beginning of a period of Jewish renewal. During those difficult years, my formative years, I

watched faith sustain and I came to appreciate its enlivening value.

I grew up in a happy and respected home. I was sometimes called names and some children never offered friendship, but I sensed that if people could hate people like my parents they were irredeemably prejudiced and nothing I could do would make any difference. I early recognized that anti-semitism was the non-Jews' problem, not mine; and I've never been particularly interested in the subject. What I could not handle, at least when I was younger, was the suggestion that Jewish survival might not be of significance to the world.

In college I took a famous survey course, History I, and had an experience not unlike the one one of you mentioned a few days ago. Jews were mentioned only in the one session which discussed Biblical times and writings. There were all those miles of non-Jewish books in Widener Library, and for the first time my father's study began to seem small and its wisdom parochial. That course destroyed my innocent belief in the pivotal role of Jewish life and thought in the development of world civilization. Since then I have smiled quietly when I read the writings of some sage who claims that Torah represents all that is worth knowing. I had then what you might call a mini-crisis of faith, but even then I recognized that those lectures reflected the narrowness of a European academic tradition which was already on its last leg, the tradition which would have its last gasp a few years later when the English historian, Arnold Toynbee, with the arrogant disdain of an Oxford don and the myopia of a self-confident Christian, declared the Jewish people "a fossilized relic." No reputable college would offer such a course today. Islam was treated as off-handedly as Judaism. The Third World was not ever on our maps. We've come to the end of the era of Western and Christian cultural imperialism. Still, as you've gathered, I have ever since been sensitive to the population problem. I know that a small pond can reflect the whole circle of the sky, but I also know that in the real world both quality and quantity are significant.

My father often quoted an old, rather cynical but astute, proverb: 'you can know more about a man by noting his enemies rather than his friends.' When I was still a child the greatest military power in Europe declared us to be World Enemy Number One and set out to wipe us off the face of the earth. I remember thinking that if we merited such attention then the Torah tradition must contain some powerful and vital truths, that the world needs our witness. The Holocaust is, of course, a human tragedy of genocidal proportions, but it is also a tribute to the reach and the authority of the Jewish message. Six million Jews were killed, not for who they were but for what they represented, and what they represented was a way of life which affirmed human dignity and a concept of justice which will not make peace with tyranny of any kind or with the Big Lie; which had no patience with the pretensions of the privileged or their claims to special treatment, which insisted on a vision of a world united in understanding and mutual respect; and which placed its faith in the will of a God who demands that we live by a commitment to righteousness which lays quite specific obligations on us. I affirm those values, and my life as a Jew is my way of expressing my commitments.

In another college course I came across, for the first time, the term, cosmopolitan, used as a pejorative label by Marxists to describe someone who is unfocused, vague, romantic, and particularly one who is ignorant of economic realities as Karl Marx had defined them. I'm no longer sure why, but I appropriated the term to describe those who found the Jewish label too parochial and who talked of belonging to the fellowship of people of good will who presumedly have put all group interests aside and now work only for the general good. I'm not sure such a fellowship exists. There are no saints out there. Good people yes, but everyone has his peculiarities and private interests. I've always believed we served humanity best by first looking to our character and discharging our obligations to our ourselves, our families, and our immediate circle. If everyone took care of their own, we'd be way ahead. In any case, help has to be specific and focused

or it's no help at all. I don't believe that anyone has to give up his or her roots, family or community in order to be socially committed. It's because of my Jewish interests and convictions that I've worked for civil rights and social reform.

My father often quoted the text: "Do not put your trust in princes," by which he meant that everyone, even the one you helped elect, had his own agenda and that those Jews who waited for 'good' Germans to oust Hitler waited in vain; as did those who were confident that President Roosevelt's administration would open America's doors to Hitler's victims or that the Vatican would act out of Christian charity to save the Jews of Europe. Everyone needs friends, but "if I am not for myself who will be for me?" My father was convinced that Israel would never come to be if Jews waited on the world's good will. As you know by now, I respond to the Torah's realism, and that I believe in the messianic journey. I also believe that the romantic and naive are not only potential victims but often become, because of their obtuseness, obstacles to progress. They want their whole dream, but in real life dreams are dreams and half a loaf is better than none. A starving man can't wait for the revolution.

As I said, I was seventeen and in college when the death camps were liberated by the Allied armies and saw, for the first time, pictures of the piles of emaciated corpses and heard the survivors tell their tales of Hell. The years that followed were the years when a million Jews languished in Displaced Person Camps in Europe while English destroyers blockaded the sea lanes to Palestine lest these survivors of the Holocaust sneak into the land they have been promised. I knew then that I owed my people a debt I would have to repay. They had died and suffered because they symbolized the tradition in which I had been comfortably raised, and I could not escape my responsibility to do all I could to continue the witness which was clearly our people's destiny. I graduated in 1947 and immediately went to work for an agency whose purpose was to secure skilled military personnel for the defense of the Yishuv as it battled Arab armies determined to drive the settlers

into the sea. My work wasn't particularly heroic, but I felt myself part of our community of fate and our community of faith, and I was proud to be part of Jewish history. The rabbinate more and more seemed a good way to live up to my commitments to this people, its Torah and its work. The survival of the Jewish people, social reform in the United States, the elaboration of the Torah tradition, and the development of a strong spiritual life became and remain active concerns.

Again and again, as I trace the way I came alive as a Jew, I find I go back to concrete moments and specific people. Activity, not apologetics, makes the Jew. No book or guru formed my faith. I don't know anyone who has been argued into being an active Jew. Experiences bind. I often feel the binding moment at worship when a familiar chant reaches into my soul. I feel bound when in the early hours of the morning I met a plane load of Soviet Jewish refugees landing at Lydda and on the Sabbath when I placed in our Ark Torah scrolls which had been cherished and read in some now-destroyed synagogues in Czechoslovakia. I felt bound during a visit to Jerusalem's Western Wall as the evening sun refracted two thousand years of piety from the rose-colored stone; and I feel the ties when I welcome the Sabbath in my home with my wife and children around our table. When the house is quieit and I'm in my library, my father's and mine, I'm bound by the ideas which reach back in time and somehow still speak to my times. I'm glad that I belong to a religious community which is in many ways an extended family and where emotions need not be hidden. Once bound, it was only natural that many of the practices of Judaism should become a major part of the fabric of my family life, the songs we sing (I, badly), the foods we eat and don't eat, the holidays we observe and the concerns we share. No, I haven't resolved all my doubts. I haven't thought through all the problems. You know by now I don't know all the answers, or even all the right questions; but I feel at home within the Jewish world and tradition, happily and usefully at home, and as I involve myself with the holidays, the worship, the texts, and the needs of Jewish survival I feel

that my life has a certain grace to it.

The loudspeaker crackled. The buses had arrived. There was a rush of good-byes. They were kind enough to say they'd enjoyed our talk.