



## Daniel Jeremy Silver Collection Digitization Project

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

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

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

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Come On In, the Water's Fine, unpublished manuscript, third  
draft, chapters 6-15, pages 124-288, 1983.

## 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 marginally 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 Charukah."

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

standard. Yet, the Sabbath and the dietary rules retain their value as forms which identify Jewish life.

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 all 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 could 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 autoncmty 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 wedding. 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 piece. 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 hasid shoteh, a foolish saint.

as wine, but poverty is the chief of vices; where there is no bread, there is no Torah. The Jew prayed every day, "Shema Yisroel," but what were not pacifists

- 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 most. 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 kit about Passover and freedom and to tell you the truth, it went in one ear and out the other. I like Seder because of 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 presumably 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 is 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 Keloheinu 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 years. 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 presumably 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 subtly 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 elders 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?

Be totally open-minded.

Then, by definition, religious belief breeds intolerance.



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.

- We share the Ten Commandments.

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 during 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.

teaching Judaism when you teach such different things?

- 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 citizers 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

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

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 ingrained 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, presumably 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 Scholen'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-

ately 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

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 who 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:

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

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



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

\* \* \*

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. God is dependable and just. Prayer, the praise

- 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 close 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. Presumably, 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 beduin 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 denoted 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 obeyed/

- 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.

And when my grandfather would finally get tired of all my "why's" 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 before him

as he stood in the midst 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."



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.

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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

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 sharp. 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 rigid 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 forty-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 absolutism. 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 promise 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.

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.



What he defines 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 cares 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 don'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.



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

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

- My grandfather was of the old school. He belonged to a Reform synagogue and when he came to services with us he always complained that the organ belongs in a church.