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COME ON IN, THE WATER'S FINE: An Investigation of Jewish Identity

Introduction

TOWARDS A PHILOSOPHY OF JEWISH SURVIVAL

Self-awareness is a mixed blessing. The child is comfortable as he is; the adult talks nervously of a need to find himself. When the world was younger and the pace of change was sedate, philosophers taught that nothing new appears under the sun; and most folk agreed. People of all ages knew who they were, where they fitted into their community, and what was good for their children. Classic literature is written in the third person and describes events rather than emotions. Folk knew who they were. In former times people did not question the fitness of inherited ties of family or the familiar ways of their community. Today they do. Ties that once bound tight have become problematic. We are keenly aware of our individuality, less likely to be subservient to authority, and quite likely to be anxious about ourselves. Modern literature tends to be an autobiographic exploration of private feelings and a display for the writer's self.

Our fathers were Jews and that was the whole of it. The outside world knew them to be Jews; and their domestic world provided a rich web of custom and commandments which shaped their routines, gave a particular color to their personalities, and provided the basis for a close-knit communal life. Their education, which was parochial; and their everyday lives, which were regulated by the religious tradition, encouraged them to feel that belonging to the Jewish people was not only a fact of life but <u>the</u> most important fact of their lives; not only inevitable but a blessing. Their lives revolved around the myth that God had declared Israel an <u>am-segulah</u>, a people especially beloved to Him; and placed them at the center of His plans for the world. Their covenant with God set forth God's will and their loyalty to those disciplines, their witness to the Torah way, set an example for the world. The messiah would be one of theirs, a descendant of the house of David.

Incidentally, I use throughout the term myth to describe a "true" story which reflects a society's most sacred understandings of the world's secrets, a story that is a most precious possession because it is sacred and, ultimately, significant (Mircea Eliade). A myth is true because it is believed. It is significant because mythic

language offers a uniquely appropriate way to express dynamic truths. Philosophy's truths are the truths of analysis and science. Philosophy dissects truth. Myth animates truth. The story retains a sense of vitality, things happen, it is alive, and s o an appropriate vehicle for the truths of religion and feeling.

Next to the fear of loneliness perhaps our deepest fear is that we may be expending our energies and days in misguided pursuits. The Jew knew what was right. God had given the Word. The Jew's life was graced not only by the peace of mind which reflects confidence in one's values and efforts but by that buoyancy of spirit which comes from being sure that God is in control and that all will turn out right in the end. If our fathers did not know exactly how their example would lead others to the faith or to the millenium, they knew it would; and, dayyenu, that was enough for them.

Our fathers were Jews. Since they led the life God had ordered, they were spiritually comfortable and rarely wondered whether to remain part of the community of Isr ael. Their Scripture affirmed the common origins of all peoples and Israel's chosenness. Their liturgy bespoke their special pride "that God has not made us like the nations of the world. . .that He has not set our destiny like theirs," Israel was set a side among the nations for a special role which imposed special and demanding obligations, but these were gladly accepted for they were seen as redemptive. When Jews left the fold it was because of political, economic or social coercion.

Today that sense of distinction has become somewhat blurred. We tend to think of other religions as complementary ways to spiritual growth. Some recent prayer books have eliminated those distancing phrases which talked of a chosen people. In the West, at least, there is a social comity which the medieval Jew did not enjoy. He knew Christ with a club. He had felt the sword of Islam. Christianity and Islam were the enemy. The gospel of love might be taught in the churches, but the Jew knew a crusader's church whose pastors often exhorted their flock against the Christ killers and led them into the street to bloody a few deicidical heads. In those years to convert was to commit an act of treachery.

In those hard times, when apartheid was the rule, some converted under threat and a few could not resist the economic and social opportunities which were reserved to the religious majority; but if conversion took place its basis was likely to be practical consideration rather than an issue of principle. Today the question of principle cannot be avoided and we have had to consider, on theological as well as political g rounds, the identity question: 'why be a Jew'. The self-confident and self-validating assumptions with which rabbinic culture had insulated the Jew and which Christian culture had used to isolate the Christian are no longer accepted uncritically; indeed, t hey are undermined by the openness of our social lives as well as by the whole burden of modern thought. We live in an environment where lifelong affiliation with one's home-grown religion is no longer inevitable or necessarily applauded. Parochial schools enroll only a small percentage of America's children. Children of all faiths mix and mingle in school, sports and society. The environment advertises the value of making up our mind. Almost every young Jew and every young Christian asks at some point in his growing up, 'why be a . . .'. Many out there no longer care what we are so, paradoxically, we have to care.

The open society is more or less the norm in the United States, Canada and Western Europe. It is not the norm in the Islamic world where conditions remain as parochial as they were in the West when medieval Europe was Christendom; nor would openness and social acceptance be words I would choose to describe an ideological society like that of the Soviet Union where 'Jew' is passport designation, atheism a dogma of the Party, and Zionism a crime. For other reasons the identity tensions faced by youth in Israel are quite different from those we face in the United States. A young Israeli speaks Hebrew, learns Jewish history in school, never has to worry that the Hebrew University will hold Fall registration on Yom Kippur and lives under political tensions which enforce a good bit of social distance between him and his non-Jewish neighbors. Our thoughts on the question, 'why be a Jew', will be appropriate only to our place.

Modernity can be defined as the emergence of options. Until recently it was either/or. One had to remain a Jew or convert to Christianity or Islam; now one can simply disappear into the community of the religiously unaffiliated or hitch one's destiny to a number of vaguely Christian or non-Christian faiths like Ethical Culture or Unitarianism or to non-theistic utopian gospels like anarchism or Marxism which offered a political or social vision rather than a theistic one, or sit at the feet of a guru.

In organizing my thoughts for this essay I compared two text books on Judaism. One had been published within the year; while the other was of nineteen-thirty vintage. The older manual compared Judaism and Christianity. The contemporary work compared Jud aism with Christianity, Zen Buddhism, some Indian cults and the 'human potential' movem ent. In the 1920's the choice was between. Today the choice is among. Again, the multiplication of options.

There are options but none is cost-free or guaranteed. Our society is not so open that the question of identity can be treated if our decisions did not involve a tangle of political or social considerations. A non-observant Jew or a Jew who practices T.M. or even a Christian convert remains in many eyes a Jew, subject to erratic badmouthing, certain social and advancement restrictions and affirmative action labeling. After the second World War in the West there was a perceptible lowering of economic and social restrictions. The Holocaust shocked many who heretofore had practiced genteel prejudice; and particularly in the United States post-war prosperity allowed groups to feel that they did not have to defend their turf as assiduously as before s ince there was enough to go around; but even so, being Jewish was/is rarely purely a matter of private conscience. Our decisions affect our family relationships, social t ies, club memberships, even the neighborhoods where we choose to live. I have yet to meet a college admissions officer who could not tell me how many Jews there were in an entering class. Politics in America increasingly involves a balancing of the interests of ethnic, racial and religious groups. Israel was a "Jewish" political issue and politicians appeal directly to the Jewish vote.

There has always been movement in and out of Jewish identity; and perhaps the most surprising fact about this phenomenon is that those who move rarely do so because of the logic of their new faith's or Judaism's theology. Religious decisions are exis- t ential decisions which grow out of private needs, not theoretical decisions which grow out of the force of conceptual analysis. "We want our children to be raised in a consistent religious environment." "When I was growing up I spent a summer at a congregational camp and I was turned on." "I organized a march on a local nuclear power plant and my rabbi refused to go along." The question, 'why be a Jew', is treated with theoretical detachment only by those to whom the question is not an immediate one.

Jewish identity assumes the existence of a Jewish community and so any discussion of the question, 'why be a Jew', must address the larger issue of the survival of the Jewish community. We face two questions: does the world-wide community of Jews play a central and consequential role in God's plans and that process we call civilization, and is it an ennobling and healing experience to be and become a Jew?

During the nineteenth century some Western Jews drew on older theological concepts about election and covenant, put these into an activist context, and developed a theological justification of Jewish survival which was satisfying to many. This set of ideas, which textbooks label the doctrine of the mission of Israel, said in effect: that the genius of the Jewish people was the first to sense the inadequacy of paganism and polytheism and to transform shrine religion into ethical monotheism. The perception of the oneness of God and the concept of religion as what you do outside the sanctuary, ideas Jews were the first to proclaim, represent truths which, unfortunately, the world has not yet fully accepted and made its own, so Jews continue to have the obligation to teach these elemental truths by reason, example and action: "You are My witnesses, s ays the Lord."

The nineteenth century was an age of technological progress, sweeping social change, increasing prosperity and naive confidence in man's ability to transform human society for the better. Medieval man had been conditioned to accept deferred rewards, the blessings of the World to Come. Modern man insisted on the messianic possibilities

of the here and now, and the mission of Israel concept was made to fit in nicely with t his new set of human expectations. The Jew of Frankfort or London lived his religion as he worked to reshape his community's political and economic structures according to Amos' standards of righteousness and justice. To cite various analogies which were favorites at the time, the Jew was to be the leaven in the dough, the enzyme in the organism, the catalyst which precipitated humane social change, one of God's shock troops in the cause of social justice.

The mission theme exhudes a certain nobility, the call to social justice is a compelling one, and was quite popular; but for all its popularity, it raised as many questions as it answered. First off: what did the speaker, the Jew, mean by justice or righteousness? These are glorious words, but justice meant one thing to the self-satisfied Germanish burgher and quite another cluster of policies to his university educated, politically radical son. Terms require context. Values have to be tied to life. I have heard Hitler, Chamberlain and Richard Nixon praise peace. Theodore Herzl recognized eighty years ago that in certain contexts the noblest words can be little more than conv entional commonplaces. "We must not confuse this application of the word (mission) w ith that given to it in speaking of those poor monks who set forth for the wild p laces of the world to carry the Christian gospel to cannabilistic tribes. The Jewish "mission" is something sated, comfortable and well-to-do. . . The missionaries are excellently situated."

Another failing of the mission theme was that it was overwhelmingly outer-directed. Many heard it say to the Jews: you serve God significantly only as you work to e radicate racism or to eliminate poverty. The customs and the traditions of the religious life, all that gives beauty and warmth to Jewish life, home observance, synag ogue worship and traditional learning, came to be seen as inconsequential, if not as distractions. Piety was not pooh-pooched. In some cases the more the Jew espoused the mission themes the less he involved himself with Jewish life, the Jewish tradition and the Jewish people. Many a Jewish activist supported every outcast minority save his own.

The mission theme was silenced by the desparate thirst of the modern Jew to be a citizen of the larger world. He had been kept outside for centuries and now, when he was finally allowed in, he wanted no part of any program of Jewish identity which kept him socially or politically apart. Such folk were determined to put behind them any attitude which suggested that they were not whole-hearted, hundred and one percent Frenchmen or Germans or cosmopolitans, and they were not beyond using the concept of m ission as a club with which to attack the Zionist pioneers who had begun to clear the land and swamps of Palestine in preparation for the re-establishment of a Jewish national home. The argument went this way: if Jews were to be a leaven in the dough, the catalyst for world-wide social change, obviously, they had to be out in the world. The world-wide scattering of Jewish settlements was not galut, exile, the term the rabbinic tradition had used to describe Jewish life since the loss of a national home; but a diaspora, a positive condition. Only by being scattered could Jews be consequential to the emergence of the brave new world. To put Jews in Palestine was to flaunt God's purposes. Some forty years ago a rabbi of Temple Emanu-El in New York City put this argument this way: "Do not ask my people to become Zionists and go and confine their best energies within that little beloved land beyond the Mediterranean blues. God bless Zion - Israel's cradle and the prophets' home and the patriarchs' great tombs. God bless those that seek the peace of Jerusalem and even today would enhance its glorious beauty. Who will not rejoice to send loving gifts and ornaments to the silver-haired mother of ours - the mother of religion and divine progress? But will ye say t hat my people has toiled and loved these many years, that it has struggled its way through the world, that it had lived the strenuous heroic life, that it has taken part in the trade, the arts, the letters, the science, the politics of all nations, that it has gone through all flames and passed through all waters and bled on all battlefields, in order now to go back to Palestine and form a secluded spiritual sect, or a tenth-rate political state? Ah, no!" (Hyman Enelow).

Time has not been kind to the mission theme. The glorious world envisaged by

nineteenth century utopians, was exposed as a mirage by the mindless tragedy of the first World War. The brave new world was still the same old jungle except that men now wielded weapons far more dangerous than darts and spears. The generation that believed in universal values, inevitable progress and the brotherhood of men of good will had to admit that its hopes were revealed as haive by the battle of the Marne. Dachau and Hiroshima drove the final nails into the coffin of these romantic visions. We no longer believe that there is a fellowship of good will out there or that man can be trusted to use his machines wisely. Machines and progress are not synonymous. There is that little red box and all those Dr. Strangeloves. Ours is a cold world, and though we still need prophetic idealism, we also need a warm religious life so we went back to t he books and recovered their full message. The mission folk had arbitrarily cut Judaism in half. Our fathers had not taught that religion was what happened outside the sanctuary, but that shrine religion was only part of the story. The Torah contains "love your neighbor as yourself" and "remember the Sabbath Day." It was not a case of either righteousness or ritual, but of spiritual encouragement and social concern.

In the nineteenth century political liberals were fond of quoting Amos, and a disproportionate number of Jews were to be found among the groups seeking to reform the old order. But when the West began to recognize that civilization was not limited to Europe, an understanding which came quite late, we had to consider that there were many parts of the world where Judaism had no standing and where Jews played no significant role. It is one thing to claim that Jews have been remarkably useful to the world. It is quite another thing to claim that Jews and Judaism somehow are indispensible, that without us civilization would disappear, and social prgress would be impossible. From Mahatma Ghandi to Martin Luther King many of the towering leaders of social progress in our century have been men who were nourished by other religious traditions. It is hard to see Jews as the enzyme for change in India or China.

We have given Europe its Bible and its vision of social justice. We have given Islam its unitarian theology and worship patterns. In the twelfth century we helped

transfer the philosophic deposit of Greece to Europe. In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries we taught Europeans to read the Bible in the original and to value the study of Scripture, individual conscience, in a way which the medieval church had neglected. In the nineteenth century the Christian world developed its social gospel on the basis of Amos and Isaiah. Turn on the radio any Sunday morning to an hour of Biblical prophecy and you will realize how important Judaism is to the messianic constructs of fundamental Christianity. But it is one thing to insist that Jews and Judaism have been and are of some real significance, and quite another to claim that we are indispensible to progress. In any case, abstract discussions of Jewish contributions to civilization though historically interesting are not personally compelling.

Actually, there is unassailable rationale of Jewish survival and no totally convincing argument as to why a Jew ought to remain a Jew; or, for that matter, a Christian a Christian or a Muslim a Muslim. Survival is a given, not a demonstrable argument. Life establishes its own right to be. Some of us are determined to be Jews to spite those who were/are determined to destroy the Jews. Emil Fackenheim insists that since World War II a new commandment exists: you shall not give to Hitler a posthumous victory. Others are moved to be active Jewishly because of our emotional response to the emergence of the State of Israel, not simply because it is there or because it is ours, but because Israel represents a triumph of the human spirit. Mankind can be brutalized, yet, something in the human spirit is indomitable. Out of the Holocaust we built a State. Civilization can rise from the ashes. Some simply love and respect their parents.

I am convinced that it is best to begin a discussion of 'why be a Jew' on a personal level. What can/does being Jewish mean to me? I am because I am. I have an inalienable right to be what I am or wish to be. The Jewish people is because we are. Existence cannot be denied to us. We are. Our primary question is not to the consequence of the survival of Judaism for the world, though we must at least consider the question, but what are the consequences for us of participation in Jewish life. What do

I/can I find in Judaism which allows me to grow, to become, to transcend my limitations? Identity is not given. Identity must be achieved. In determining our future, talents and force of will are important, but, to a surprising degree, we become what we become because of the place in which we find ourselves and the influences bearing upon us. I am what I am because of my family, because of the schooling that was offered to me, because of the social context in which I grew up and now live, because I had a Jewish home and a Jewish education. My decision was to explore my world and open myself to its subtler insights. I could not change my childhood, and did not want to, so I opened myself to the traditions of the Jewish people and to the records of various encounters between Jews and God. As I took these experiences into myself and tried to understand them I found that I was not only encouraged to be part of a long-lived, historic and courageous people, but that my own life took on a satisfying shape and that I gained wisdom and a sense of purpose. It seems to me that the value of Judaism for the individual and the reason for the survival of the Jewish people is that it allows us to shape our lives within a grand, rich and insightful religious civilization. How do I know? I know. I have felt the change.

I believe in the far mystery. I believe that there is some ultimate significance involved in the survival of the Jewish people. I believe that God touched Jewish history with significance back there at Sinai; how else explain our continuing significance despite our limited numbers; but I also believe that it is foolish to try to unravel the mystery. Years of being put off by writers who know God's mind have convinced me of the wisdom implicit in the comment of the rabbi who advised his colleagues: "Seek not to explain God's ways to man for these are beyond your understanding."

I do not know how our continuance as Jews affects the world, but I know that it has ennobled many and that because of my exposure to this people - its sacrifices and its heroism - because of my exposure to this tradition - its wisdom and its humanity - I have grown and become more sensitive, and I cannot but believe that such is God's will and purpose.

What follows is not theology but a suggestion as to how the question, 'why be a Jew', can be usefully approached. Since I believe that Judaism is best defined as a living, developing tradition, as the religious civilization of the Jewish people rather than as a foxed doctrine or a revealed legislation, I have not attempted to develop systematically the various Jewish affirmations. Rather, I have tried to present a way of thinking about being Jewish and about becoming an active Jew which, I hope, has the value of being fresh and suggestive, and may I use that awful word, relevant?

Chapter 1

DOING WHAT COMES NATURALLY

A bench in front of a rustic lodge. Mid-morning. A middle-aged rabbi in Pendleton shirt and gray flannel slacks seated on the bench. A dozen or so campers sprawled on the grass. Sunshine. A typical camp institute scene.

A voice from the lawn: It doesn't bother me that I am a Jew and that's what bothers me. I have never felt an outsider. I don't doubt that there is anti-semitism, but I have not personally encountered it. In any case, I want my religion's decisions to be positive ones. Being Jewish or being anything has to make a difference in me, and that is the problem. My home is just like the Smith's next door. I went to Sabbath School. John went to Sunday School, but as far as I can see the only distinction between us is that we celebrate holidays at different times of the year. We have gone to the same schools. We like the same music and, generally, think alike. I don't doubt that there were differences. My parents talk about the Holocaust and Israel. My grandparents tell me how close-knit Jewish families were and wax nostalgic about the holidays of their childhood. I do not doubt the civilizing value of the Bible or that there have been a disproportionate number of Jewish Nobel Prize winners, but that's the past or someone else's accomplishment. For me the question is personal and immediate. I just do not see that being Jewish makes much difference to me.

The Institute had invited me to lead a discussion on the theme: why be a Jew? I had prepared a two-word response: why not? Everyone must have an identity. We all belong to various communities. The jargon term is reference groups. No one is just himself. I could think of many labels less noble and of many less wise and colorful religious cultures than ours, so why not be a Jew?

I had complained long and loud when my parents insisted that the family be together each Friday night around the Sabbath table and that I give up

to add up to - -
tion took place in - .

schoolyard baseball for after-school Hebrew lessons, but I come to appreciate the ties of family and, in retrospect, am pleased my mind was nurtured by a high religious culture rather then by the sweeping confusion, incredible depersonalization and disintegrating structures, not to mention the vulgarity which marks so much of our world. I know I do not want my children to have a mass media identity. I have been a child and I am a parent and I can testify that a Jewish home and the Jewish world can be an emotionally secure and culturally exciting environment, so why not be a Jew?

Such reasoning will satisfy a fifty-year old who has known some of the quieter satisfactions of the Jewish experience and has come to terms with himself and history, but not a restless eighteen-year old who is eager to discover for himself who he is and what life is all about. At eighteen or twenty no one wants td settle for the life of his parents. There are so many new places to go and experiences to enjoy. He wants the best, not just the familier. He wants to try the high road and break new ground, and so my two words become a week-long conversation which ranged over theology, philosophy, politics, the institutions of Jewish life, ethics and the realities of being a Jew in a convulsed world.

I hesitate to call what follows a dialogue, not only because this is a composition and not the transcription of a tape, but because I did not restrict myself to the role of a passive adult who values the expression of feelings so highly that he is unwilling to correct errors of fact or challenge that overconfident dogmatism which is often a young person's way of asserting himself. I am not by temperement a facilitator. I am a rabbi. I have convictions and I am prepared to defend them. I tried as best I could to disabuse them of misinformation and to force the group to take a second and third look at the conventional assumptions of their peers and their everyday environment. I am told that I am a good listener, but I have ideas and I wanted the week to add up to a challenge. We talked.

Our conversation took place in a particular time, in a particular

context, and among a particular group of people. Most were in their late teens and were products of middle-class homes, suburban public school systems and the nineteen-seventies. They were sufficiently involved in Jewish life to risk a week at such a camp. A few had toured Israel. None considered themselves pious, though a number were active in their congregations. They did not ask for and I did not present an outline of basic Judaism. The issues were personal. They asked whether it was possible for Judaism to play an enhancing role in their lives. Conversation at dinner turned on the baseball pennant race and youth group gossip. Several were in love but most seemed interested in the problem to which we kept returning: why be a Jew?

Why not? Deciding on a religion is not like setting out to buy a suit of clothes or a dress. We cannot pick any suit which entices our fancy off the rack. We derive our identity from experiences, from our environment and from reflection on all that happens to us. Faith develops dialectically. We are born into a given family, community and culture and are conditioned by our world long before we begin to think critically about its values. A young child does not separate his self from all that happens about him. He lives, as an animal lives, largely by doing what comes naturally. As we mature, as our mind and imagination develops, we begin to make judgments about our environment, but the self is never an unconditoned "I". As we grow we consciously and unconsciously weave ideas which have come to us from our reading the talk and actions of our peer group, television, parents and our own reflections and experiences into an identity. In religious matters the collective religious spirit precedes an individual's faith. Judaism seems natural and comfortable to me while Hinduism does not. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say Judaism is a live option and a reality to which I must make a response where Hinduism is only an abstraction. Life may take us far from our roots but, as Dr. Freud has taught us, we never shake ourselves completely free of them.

No one is self-made. We become not only what our talents and our will

allow us to become but, to a large degree, what home, school and culture permit us to become.

Wait a minute. I do my homework. No one does it for me. I will choose my career. No one is going to tell me what to do.

Did you see a Jean Trufaut film called The Wild Child? About a century ago in France a boy was abandoned by his parents and raised by wolves. When he was found at about the age of nine he was not only illiterate and fearful of human contact but unaware of the use of speech to communicate ideas. His environment was wild and so was he.

But that's a movie.

Yes, but it was based on an actual case. Without family, schools, books, music, friends, we would not progress far beyond the instinctive survival skills. Weeds grow without cultivation; flowers do not.

Don't be so uptight about being independent. George Bernard Shaw said it with customary verve: "Independence, that's middle-class blasphemy. We are all dependent on one another, every soul of us on earth." You can make too much of freedom. Were it not for our absorption of culture, each of us would have to reinvent the wheel. The wild child had only his instincts to rely on. We are free to make conscious decisions precisely because we absorb like sponges the world others have made and use that knowledge to help us put together a purposeful life.

Our Bible faithfully depicts the human condition. After crossing the Reed Sea, the ex-slaves were free, free and undisciplined, free and suicidal. They grumbled against Moses. Maddened by hunger and unable to see beyond their hunger they demanded to be taken back to their miserable life in Egypt. They remained an unruly mob until at Sinai they accepted rules and commandments. Now there was direction. For the first time the Israelites were free to make something of their lives. Some of the most independent folk I know were raised in tightly-organized homes which maintained defined standards. A strong sense of self often develops best where there are consistent

disciplines, predictable rules and highly visible benchmarks.

A voice from the lawn called me back from further digression on the paradox that we achieve freedom through self-discipline. My folks aren't hypocrites but I can't see where being Jewish has made them better than most folk or, for that matter, different.

Another voice cut in: I read about those prayer breakfasts where senators, businessmen and generals begin the day with bowed heads only to spend the rest of the day manipulating the levers of power. Aren't they a bunch of hypocrites?

The voice of reason, obviously my voice: Question the value of such an exercise if you want, but not the sincerity of the participants. Many of those who attend those Washington breakfasts are not hypocrites. Their faith is not a put-on. If you want to understand religion you must learn not to dismiss out of hand what you do not understand or agree with.

Let me give you an example of what I mean. In April of 1979, under not so gentle pressure exerted by the United States, the Prime Minister of Israel, Menachem Begin, and the President of Egypt, Anwar Sadat, met at Camp David to draw up terms for a peace conference between their nations. The negotiations successfully completed, a public ceremony was organized at the White Hous for the formal signing of the accords. On that occasion each of the heads of state made an appropriate speech. I remember being struck that each man, during the course of his remarks, quoted the same line from the prophet Isaiah: "They shall beat their swords into plough shares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation shall not lift up sword against nation. Neither shall they learn war any more." The next day both Sadat and Begin put the peace conference behind and went up to the Hill to petition Congress to sell more arms to their respective military, and the American President held a press conference in which he explained the treaty in the cold terms of geo-politics.

Politicians have been known to quote Scripture for no better purpose then to gain votes but in this case I think each leader spoke from the heart.

Each is a confirmed believer, in fact a rather traditional believer. Jimmy Carter affirms an evangelical form of Protestant Christianity, Menachem Begin practices orthodox Judaism, and Anwar Sadat follows the Sunni tradition of Islam. Why then the sudden shift from a vision of peace to the agenda of national defense? As traditional believers they look on this text as a messianic promise rather than a mandate for universal disarmament. They know it begins, "in the end of days it shall come to pass", and that this is not yet the end of days. Their respective religious traditions have a sensitive appreciation of complex emotions which course in the human soul and of the uncertainty of the politics which determine the future. Each has been taught by his tradition that realistic prudence as well as prophetic commitment are required of man, at least as long as the world remains unredeemed.

You suggest that religion tolerates, even applauds, military preparations. Aren't war and guns the interests of the devil rather than God?

Some traditions are pacifist. Judaism was the first among the religions of mankind to project the vision of universal peace; but our sages also taught: 'if one comes to kill you, kill him first'. Don't be among those who make the mistake of equating religion with a set of moral absolutes. In order to be a peace maker, you must still be alive. A religious tradition which did not offer both the high vision and practical everyday advice would not be terribly useful.

Define religion then.

"Religion is that cluster of memories and myths, rites and customs, ideas and institutions, that pulls together the life of a person or group into a meaningful whole" (Harvey Cox).

Life must have coherence and we need to feel that there is more ahead than frustration, illness and the grave. We fear aimlessness. We need to know that we are not running around in circles. Religions provide certification and confirmation of a group's aspirations and values. Every society has, or has had, a religious component for the good reason that no group can

function successfully unless it is satisfied that its energies are directed meaningfully, that its values are valid and that its efforts will be rewarded. Religions exist because we cannot manage without them. Mental and social health require that we overcome our doubts and fears. The religious need is as natural to us as the need to love.

All religions grow out of the universal human need for a vision which provides order and a sense of direction to life. The key element in religion is the promise of redemption. Redemption may be seen as that clarity which brings order into the confusions of everyday life, as that confidence which allows us to overcome the fear of death, as the possession of sacred rituals which will guarantee a good harvest or fertility; or as the conviction that we belong to that part of humanity who can and will be saved from defeat or anonymity. The redemptive promise may take the shape of resurrection, a messianic age, the Promised Land, the New Jerusalem, the victory of the proletariat. Our experiences are varied and confusing. Religion sees a higher purpose within the confusion. Religions exist because we cannot do without such a sense of purpose. Psychologists describe the need to find order as one of the built-in primitives of our emotional apparatus. "Apparently we can adapt ourselves to anything our imagination can cope with except chaos. Religion represents the insights, symbols, rituals and ethical principles by which a society confirms that there is in fact order and hope. I could give you a number of sophisticated definitions of religion; but perhaps it's easiest to say simply that"religion is all that we do to prove to ourselves that God is not mad" (Salvador be Medrirga).

A friend of mine, of no particular religious persuasion, traveled with me to the Alps. We watched the sun set across the snow-bound peaks and I remember his saying: "This is the closest I've come to a religious experience. I doubt that so much beauty could exist by chance." He had sensed order and once you sense order you begin to sense a guiding hand or indwelling spirit. God is not mad. That simple affirmation is the bedrock on which all religions stand.

Animals respond out of instinct to their environment. They struggle to survive as we do but they do not wonder why or whether they are going about it in the right way. Alone of all animate creatures, humans are aware of being alive. For better or worse, we are conscious of the fact that life is full of contradictions; all too brief; and often terribly bruising; that there is injustice in human society; some have more; some have less; and that there are strange quirks in our personality; some accept easily, some must wrestle with the fates. We know we do not always do what we mean to do. We cannot help wondering what life is and what death is and whether there is any purpose to all our exertions. Do we know what is right and what can we, what should we, do about it? These are religious questions.

We cannot survive, certainly not sanely or successfully, caught in a web of paralysing doubt. Something in each of us reaches out to find hope and meaning and finds it. Psychologists speak of a will to believe. The self-conscious human needs to know that there is a way that he/she ought to go, a way which gives meaning and grace to what would otherwise be a hapless journey. Questions of purpose and value are asked by all out of the common need to resolve the contradictions which we experience every dey and the answers we find and share provide coherence, a center, a focus to our lives.

A common need seems to exist for us to be in touch with a hope which frees us from the contradictions inherent in our mortality. Once articulated, society enshrines these visions in religious structures and creates rituals and sacred moments which affirm their validity, encourage us to do our duty and remind us that we are not alone in our hopes.

The heart of Judaism is not the philosophic statement, God is one, but the religious statement that the God who redeemed our ancestors from Egypt and brought them to the Promised Land is the God who will fulfill His covenanted promises to give the world peace, Israel security in its land and the individual the possibility of a fulfilling life. Religions code much of their teaching in symbols. The heart of Judiasm is the promise that we need

not spend all our lives wandering around in the barren wilderness but, that with God's help, we will cross over Jordan and enter the Promised Land.

We are born not by any act of choice. We will die not by choice and most of us not at a time of our choosing. Life is not only brief but confusing. There is no way to prove that we should go one way and not another or that the goals we have formulated are worthwhile or attainable, but we need to believe that what we do is right and that our best laid plans are intelligently formed and that their effect will be consequential, in brief, that there is hope for us.

We are religious because we are aware of being alive and desperately need to resolve the contradictions of existence. We need to find life a potentially ennobling experience and not a bitter life sentence without hope of parole. We are religious not because we believe but because we need to believe; and, consciously or unconsciously, we all believe.

But I'm not religious. A ripple of laughter ran through the group.

Then you really don't know yourself. I think you probably use a purely institutional definition of religion. What you are saying is that you do not feel close to what happens in your synagogue. What I am saying is that Judaism, Christianity, Islamism, Hinduism are classic religions, but not the only ones and that, in fact, everyone has religious beliefs. You believe in yourself. You believe in democracy and justice. You believe that you can be happy and our world a better place. You think you can shape your life. On what basis do you hold these convictions?

They're right.

How do you know?

Everyone believes in them.

Not so. In China the individual is taught to subordinate his ego to the collective. Harmony, not initiative, is the standard; and justice is not defined as freedom to go your own way but as the duty of the state to organize life equitably. The assumptions of Mao's Little Red Book are no more scien-

[illegible] in fact, religious positions though both you and

he, or his ghost, may object to be so labeled.

If all religions help us transcend doubt and despair, there is some good in each; but I can't believe Maoism and Judaism should be mentioned in the same breath. How do I know that a religious way is right and its teachings truly ennobling?

Every religious tradition confirms a vision and is, in that sense, redemptive; but not all visions are sensitive or healthy. There are liberating visions and malignant ones. As in every other aspect of life, one must learn to be discriminating in matters religious. Each religion consecrates a particular set of actions as necessary to the unfolding of the promise and these can and must be judged. Even within a religious tradition there can be beneficent and malevolent understandings of the teachings and rituals. Christianity has had its recluses and its social gospel. Judaism has had its mystics and its philosophers. Various individuals and groups will emphasize different means, duties, by which the goal can be attained - prayer, magic, vigorous citizenship, withdrawal from the world.

Above the Ark in our synagogue there is a wooden replica of the two tablets which bore the Ten Commandments. The commandments are specific. "You shall not murder, steal, commit adultery, bear false witness, covet." Aren't ethics and religion synonymous terms? You seem to suggest that religion deals in dreams rather than in duties.

Religion includes but transcends ethics. The ethical goal is goodness. The religious goal is holiness. Some have described holiness as the high we get when our doubts are resolved and everything falls into place. That's too pedestrian a definition. Things fall into place when we feel that we have sensed the mystery too deep for words, what life is all about. In Judaism holiness is the special attribute of God, of the hidden reality, which is all we will ever know of the mystery; and every aspect of Judaism, the memories and the myths, the hopes and the images, the rites and the customs, reflect the faith that within the mystery there is a God whose

nature is to be steadfast to the terms of His covenant. Myth is best defined as symbolic thought. One of the core myths of Judaism underscores this point. Moses is on Mt. Sinai. He has served God well and now asks the invisible God a special favor: "Show me Your Presence." Man is by nature curious. Mysteries exist to be penetrated, but man cannot see God. So Moses is told to turn to the rock while God "makes all His goodness pass nearby". This language insists that God's presence has the ethical deeply embedded in it. God, as we know Him, is not simply power but wise purpose.

Holiness is a vision of a consecrated life. Ethics are the norms by which we manage honorably our day to day relations. Ethics deals with right and wrong in terms of human behavior. Religion expresses the group's understanding of right and wrong in terms of the redemptive dimensions of life, as Divine commands, and thus provides a ground for moral imperatives. Holiness includes the conventional virtues, but goes beyond them. If religion were simply a collection of ethical propositions it would be more like a civics class than the rich complex of redemptive themes and ceremonies that it is. A religion's definitions of holiness will determine what it declares to be right and what it considers as wrong. In Judaism suicide is wrong. God gave us life and set its limits. In Shinto ritual suicide, hari-kari, is considered a virtue since honor is the necessary condition of life. Our vision of the holy forces us to commit ourselves to the Torah's do's and don'ts. The familiar image of God, the Holy One, revealing the law to Moses is, among other things, a metaphor of this idea.

When we try to decide what is right we recognize that our judgments reflect a particular cultural context; and perhaps a good bit of self-serving rationalization. When God speaks we feel that His commandments define right and wrong and are beyond question, unconditional: "It has been told you, O man, what is good and what the Lord requires of you." Religion puts iron in our moral judgments precisely because our actions now conform to a vision of permanence and ultimate meaning, God.

Some religious traditions separate the spiritual and the ethical rather dramatically. Paul, the Christian founder, felt constrained by the Torah's way and cut the close tie between the holy and the ethical which the Biblical tradition affirmed. Man, he said, is saved not by deeds but by faith. Lacking faith no man can master his libido, original sin. Redemption becomes entirely the work of God's grace. Pauline Christians have little difficulty understanding that religion and ethics are distinct categories of thought. Jews do. For us holiness and honorable behavior are inseparable. No wonder Christian scholars began to describe Judaism as an ethical monotheism; the worship of the one God through obedience to prescribed norms of conduct which are largely ethical in content.

Let me heighten the contrast. Ask yourself whether all religions encourage those values we instinctively label as ethically valid: openness, love, honesty, family and social justice.

Yes.

No.

Silence. Finally, I filled the void. When Germany's best and brightest went to Hitler's youth camps, did the Nazi rituals encourage them to be sensitive, generous and peace-loving? Hitler disparaged the Bible as a blueprint for a slave mentality. He wanted strength, force, a commitment to the state, absolute obedience from the blond-haired, blue-eyed scions of the master race. He taught the right of might. Sympathy was a weakness.

Naziism is not a religion. It was a political philosophy, perhaps a madness, but not a religion.

Why not?

It's evil.

Must religions be good?

Yes.

Why?

Again silence. Again, I filled the void. I suggested that Naziism

included all the features of a religion: strong faith in a charismatic leader, total commitment to a set of values which are held to be of cosmic importance, certainty that there is only one truth and that all error must be suppressed, grand public pageants at holy shrines like Nuremberg, a bible, Mein Kampf, a messianic vision of a redeemed world purified by Aryan values and Aryan leaders; in short, a redemptive vision.

For many this was a bit much, but I pressed on with a seemingly tangential question: How would you define a religious person?

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

Wouldn't that include the Nazis?

Someone who is affiliated with a congregation.

Couldn't you call the Nazi Party a congregation?

Silence, so I went after another common confusion, that to be religious is to be different from other people, something many people are not. Are there religious and non-religious folk?

Yes, about half of all Americans are not members of a church or synagogue.

Does it follow that those who are not affiliated with any recognizable religious body are, therefore, non-religious?

First off, not all religions require membership. In India and China people come at will to the local Hindu, Buddhist or Taoist shrine. There are no shrine memberships or dues. You toss a coin into a box when you are there. In the Orient religious life tends to be inclusive rather than exclusive. You need not choose between religions. You can make up your own mixture of what is available. Many feel that religious bonds are panoply and not at all pious.

In cultures where religion and the daily routines are still intimately connected, all degrees of piety are to be found, including, certainly, some who see only the all too human sides of the religious enterprise and are appalled; yet, the values and vision of religious attitudes are pervasive and inescapable. You have here the explanation of the irreligious Jews who

became the original Zionist pioneers. Intellectually they were doctrinaire socialists who looked on Judaism as an impediment to raising the consciousness of the Jewish proletariat; they wanted people to trust in solidarity and actual action not ; but, nonetheless, their upbringing and circumstances led them to devote their lives to the age-old messianic dream which centered on a return to Zion. Piety measures spiritual intensity. Religion simply describes the redemptive vision which animates a culture and its institutions.

There are no irreligious folk; but I've a friend who is an atheist.

Many have converted without acknowledging the fact to one of the highly structured economic ideologies of the day, ideologies which I would argue are, in fact, religious in structure and form; or he may have joined, perhaps without being consciously aware of the fact, the ranks of America's civic religion.

What's a civic religion.

When cultural anthropologists and sociologists describe a civic religion, they mean a body of assumptions which enjoy wide-spread agreement and are affirmed by national holidays and rituals. These assumptions deal with human nature, the nature of healthy community, citizenship and the national purpose. They underlie our law, inform our school curriculum and are evident in our dealings with each other. The key words here are "assumption" and "widespread agreement." Religion involves these two elements: a set of convictions about the meaning and promise of life which gain currency in a group which proceeds to shape the social order and its culture around them.

Observers describe this civic religion as a secular humanism which affirms a public faith centered on an ethical humanism: the autonomous individual, the Bill of Rights, public welfare and human brotherhood. The vision is of a humane republic established in justice. The commandments are those of social service. The holidays are the Fourth of July, the second Tuesday in November and Thanksgiving Day. The sacred symbols are the Lincoln

Memorial and the ballot. This is putting the best possible construction on the civic religion. I am afraid that the cluster of ideas and institutions included in America's civic religion includes competitive sports, happiness through having, competition and live and let live. In any case, though not everyone who is unchurched belongs to this tradition, and many who are churched accept some of its major promises and premises which are, after all, in origin Biblical; in effect, it provides for those who believe all the necessary elements of a religious faith: a promise of the future, a sense of purpose and a social and personal ethic. Instead of Micah's synthesis of the Biblical tradition I just cited, this faith's shorthand message is President Kennedy's famous motto: "Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country. . ."

Where is God in all this? I've always assumed you can't have the one without the other.

You do not have to believe in God to be religious. The most successful religious movements of this century, Leninism and Maoism, are atheist and consider the God-focused religions as opiates of the masses. It continues to surprise some to hear such uncompromising materialistic ideologies described as religions, but they are, in fact, almost mirror images of the classic religions in their most medieval form. Portraits of the founding saints hang high in ceremonial halls. Mausoleums which contain the body of the patriarchs are objects of pilgrimage. A consecrated scripture is interpreted officially and those who question received dogma are condemned as heretics. Books are censored. Only the official truth may be preached. The formation of a person's faith is carefully supervised in parochial schools by a zealous clergy. There is even a messianic promise: the great day when the contradictions of history will be resolved and the age of classless joy will envelop the earth.

Once upon a time in Europe there were only Christians, a few Jews and

a few backwoods tribes still caught up in animistic rites which civilized Folk denounced as heathen Dictionaries of the time reflect the myopia of the majority and define religion as faith in the Christ. During the Age of Discovery, the West began to recognize that it did not represent the whole of human culture and the list of religions was enlarged to include Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism and such Chinese traditions as Taoism. When scholars began to study seriously the texts of Theravada Buddhism and the Confucian tradition they began to recognize that not all religions were based on faith in a personal god or gods. Still later, cultural anthropology discovered that to discuss religion intelligently we needed a methodology which analyzed function rather than form. Rituals are colorful, but to understand a religion you must begin with the redemptive ideas of that group: their particular understanding of the meaning of life, their teaching of how the limitations of mortality and the contradictions of history can be transcended, and their formulation of the obligations of redemptive living - the rules, rituals and rites by which they express and confirm their ideas. The result was a growing awareness that any serious study of religion must include not only the infinite varieties of faith and practice which had been set aside as primitive but the modern secular ideologies which claim to be anti-religious but are in fact precisely that.

Some years ago I read a fascinating book which presented the biographies of a number of American and English intellectuals who had become converts (sic) to Communism in the early years of the Russian revolution and who later had lost their faith either during the Stalin purges or when in 1939 the Soviet Union signed a non-aggression pact with Nazi Germany. Entitled The God That Failed, this study suggested that in most cases those who gave up on Marx had found the need to convert formally to another confirmatory theology, usually one as absolutist and uncompromising as the highly structured and authoritarian tradition they had abandoned.

Certain personality types have an urgent need for doctrine to be spelled

out authoritatively. Others need to be able to worship regularly , while others have only occasional religious needs usually around the pivotal moments of their private lives, marriage, the birth of a child, the death of a parent.

Religion is a matrix of ideas and activities which each of us relates to in his own way. In a tight culture everyone shares the myths and memories but not necessarily with similar urgency.

When we describe someone as non-religious we usually mean that person seems to pay little attention to the conventional religious institutions, but there are many ways to be religious. In our open and heterogeneous society there are religious eclectics who have shaped their faith out of a mixed bag of principles and values, but these folk, too, are religious though it is sometimes difficult to describe with any precision what they affirm, how their faith shapes their actions and what congregation they attend. Yet, all are religious because they are human and, therefore, subject to the law of our nature which is that sanity requires a redeeming vision.

In Israel there is a well-known division between those who call themselves dati, religious, and the lo-dati, the non-religious; but these terms must be understood in the context of Israeli life. The issue is a political, not a religious, one. The lo-dati oppose the current arrangements which give rabbinic authorities control over the laws of personal status and believe in the separation of synagogue and state. Not surprisingly, a number of active and affiliated synagogue Jews are lo-dati. If I lived in Israel I would be among them.

Aren't a large number of Israel's Jewish citizens actually non-religious? Our cousins visited us recently. They had not been in a synagogue since they left Europe twenty years ago and were not interested in going to services with us. Just as there is an American civic religion, there is an Israeli civic religion which draws its vision from a sense of peoplehood, the Bible as a natural classic, the promise of the land, Hebrew, the social idealism of

Amos and Jeremiah, the holiness of Jerusalem, and the traditional calendar of Sabbath and the holidays. Synagogues are seen as places where an old God is worshipped and they see themselves as devoted to new Jewish ideas; it's not traditional Judaism, but picks up many of its elements: the sense of shaped history, peoplehood and Zion redeemed in justice as well as the calendar and Hebrew keep the ties close.

Everyone is religious, but not everyone is pious. Just as some play an instrument by ear, so piety is a special endowment and an emotional outlet which some need and enjoy more than others. Piety is simply taking the spiritual teachings of one's religion seriously.

I was helped by a back bencher. I've always felt that my friend, John, is religious though he protests that he is not. He believes in humen decency, the public school, affirmative action, the inevitability of arms control and world government. To him these are purely rational affirmations but he becomes uncomfortable if his ideas are challenged. I tried to tell him that his ideas flowed from a faith in the goodness of the human being and the possibility of transforming the social order for the better, ideas which cannot be proven from newspaper headlines, recent history or any psychological research, but he insisted his ideas were purely scientific.

We cannot live with chaos. Our dependence on a religious system, the symbols and symbol systems which confirm our sense of order, is decisive in maintaining our composure and balance in the face of life's challenges, so much so that any challenge to these assumptions creates tension and anxiety.

Is that why I can never have an easy conversation with non-Jewish friends about religion? The question was rhetorical.

The camp loudspeaker crackled with a call to sports. I asked them to think over a paragraph from George Santayana's Reason In Religion: "Every living and healthy religion has a marked idiosyncrecy. Its power consists in its special and surprising message and in the bias which that revelation

another world to live in - whether we expect ever to pass wholly over into it or no - is what we mean by having a religion." Religion is. The question we must face is whether my religion is worthy.

Chapter 2

MY FAITH AND OUR RELIGION

We picked up the conversation as if there had not been a break. Religion is a private matter. I will make up my own mind. No one is going to tell me what to believe.

They already have. No one lives solo. You speak and think in English. Your attitudes have been shaped by the mass media, suburbia, what you have read and what you have seen your parents and friends do. No one starts a religious search with a clean and unfurnished mind. You become an "I" only when you accept your conditioning and use it much as a great artist masters the disciplines of his medium and transcends them. The parent who keeps his child out of religious school and avoids all ritual in the home so that Johnny will be free later to make up his mind acts quite foolishly. Not only does he deny the child a chance to experience/the warmth and encouragement of a religious tradition of proved quality; but, since emotional growth requires the sense of high purpose and bracing moral challenge religion provides, his child will find a substitute for what he is denied and a pop religion may not have the sensitivity and balance of the Torah tradition.

easily and naturally

I used to suggest that an informed decision was wiser than one based on ignorance, but despite its validity, that argument made little impression. Now I simply observe that such children may not have to shed a Jewish imprint, but they probably will have to shed the imprint of the rather coarse and self-indulgent materialist and hedonist culture whose values are consecrated on the television they watch every Sabbath morning and most other times.

I'm puzzled. I was told that religion was what a person does with his loneliness.

Someone quoted Alfred North Whitehead to you and this is a case where a fine logician was guilty of imprecision. Faith is what a person does with his loneliness. Faith is our private appropriation of and commitment

to our religious culture. Religion is the corporate and symbolic expression of a community's vision. Faith says: I believe. Religion says: here are the synagogues, scriptures, holidays, rituals, proverbs, myths, liturgies, ethical values and sacred symbols which lift up your religion's special and surprising message. A Jew, Christian and Muslim may each have faith in a personal god but the way their faith will be expressed and reinforced and the personal consequences of faith for their lives will be quite distinct because each one's life is shaped by his religious tradition.

Not so fast. Religion is a private, not a public, affair. I can believe or not.

Faith is your private understanding of and emotional involvement in your religion. Religion is a society's understanding of meaning, vision, purpose and divine power. In building a faith we drew on our religious culture and shape our faith out of materials that culture provides; and our faith, in turn, shapes the continuing tradition.

Go back a moment to the religious experience. What is it?

It's a binding experience during which the religion ceases to be out there somewhere and becomes part of us. Early in this century a German scholar, Rudolph Otto, described the sense of coming alive to one's religion as a response to the numinous, a sense of touching and being deeply effected by a reality beyond what is known in everyday experience. Otto, a non-Jew, found the numinous present on various occasions, including a Yom Kippur service in a small North African synagogue. The worshippers were in white. The chant was minor-keyed and repetitive. The congregation moved with an hypnotic sway which swept the worshippers out of themselves and clearly took them beyond ordinary feelings and thoughts. I am sure people have sensed the numinous in a May Day parade or a Nurenberg Rally or an African tribal dance. In each case the moment is special and the music and ritual distinctive; emotions flow and the participants feel confirmed and consecrated. Jews use Kedusha, holiness, as our perception of the numinous. At one point

in his life, the prophet Isaiah entered the Temple in Jerusalem, felt the inrush of the quickening spirit, God's spirit, and spoke spontaneously words which have remained the prototype for all testimonies to this experience: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of Hosts, the whole earth is full of His glory", refract this sense of enlivening awe and humility, enshrined in our daily worship.

I can't associate holiness with the high young Communists feel on Red Square on May Day, but I can associate a denatured term like numinous. Kedusha has Jewish overtones. The God whose wording, the deeper reality, presents to us a sense of divinity which will not exalt marching armies or the forceable collectivization of society. I have no doubt that Ivan can have a religious high which confirms all that has been taught him about duty and the future. The fact that you say 'I believe' does not validate what you believe in.

Some identify redemption/salvation, the feeling that we are living significantly and in tune with the universe, with the promise of life in the hereafter, but that is only one possible form of a saving gospel. The promise may be long life, health and wealth, the lasting significance of your labors, a messiah, a messianic age, peace of mind, triumph over enemies, Aryan conquest, the victory of the proleteriat. Actually, to be redeemed means simply to feel that your values are confirmed, your efforts significant and that there is hope. Whatever the promise, it expresses our need for a confirming assurance that what we are doing is dignified, worthy of us and of permanent value; and since we are by nature social beings, our redemptive vision inevitably involves others: family and community. History makes this clear. The vision may begin with one man: an Abraham, a Paul, a Mohammed; but, inevitably, others are caught up in it, and a religion emerges.

A voice from the lawn. Why must my faith envolve synagogues and public rites? The fact that the religious life has taken on a public face: tribal

rites, public sacrifices, the procession of images, doesn't mean that it can't stop. Once institutions emerge, coercion is inevitable. The classic religions have crusades, inquisitions and censorship to their discredit.

All human institutions are ripe with contradictions but we cannot do without them. Schools both educate and doctrinate. Hospitals cure and unnecessarily prolong some lives. A religious community provides its congregants warmth and community and keeps others away.

A synagogue performs a number of crucial functions. It offers congregation, an end to loneliness; calender, a set of effective reminders of the joys and duties and tradition; and the wisdom of the past. Synagogues exist because we are social beings whose ideas and feelings are both refined and strengthened by being shared.

The medieval world ended when people began to say: I will no longer acknowledge anyone else's authority over what I read, think or say. In the modern world, at least in our part of the modern world, freedom and autonomy are virtues; authority and submission are unacceptable. But no one is an island and this emphasis on autonomy has become, in some hands, an anarchic privatism, "I don't owe anyone anything." "What I do is nobody else's business," which undermines all the relationships which allow marriage, family and the common weal to flourish. I don't believe in twisting anyone's arm, but it is possible to take freedom one step too far. When a religious body has the power of the state at its beck and call, that power can be both dangerous and corrupting, but when, as in the case of the American synagogue, the only power it possesses is the power of suggestion then its approach is necessarily gentle.

What about doctrine. How can I honestly affirm articles of faith with which I do not concur?

Religious bodies often formulate a culture's doctrines and teachings and these formulae are never more than an approximation of what moves in the hearts of the faithful. Catechisms are no different from any set of ideas

which attempt to express feeling, hope, a vision, an awareness of ultimate meaning, which is to say that they suggest but do not exhaust; point to but do not circumscribe. Catechisms can be coercive. Fortunately, in this respect, Judaism has shown remarkable restraint. We have never broken heads over the nature of God or, for that matter, any theological issues. There are doctrines, but the tendency has been to stay fairly loose in such matters. Despite his great prestige, Maimonides was not able to make the synagogue accept as a loyalty oath his Thirteen Articles of Faith. The emphasis was more on doing than on defining.

What is wrong with the desire to persuade others of the redemptive values that you cherish?

But in Israel the National Religious Party has played a political power game and gotten control of the rules regulating personal status. A whole society has been forced to govern by rabbinic norms. Surely, you wouldn't call that approach gentle.

I would not. The orthodox community in Israel is still caught up in a medieval mind which sees nothing wrong with the state enforcing God's will. There must be law. What better law for a state than God's? Calvin's Geneva and Khomeini's Iran were based on the same deceptively simple logic, the logic of a world which did not trust its own judgment. Modern man has no alternative.

I am not arguing that Jewish history does not have dark patches. By definition, a religious culture is a very human enterprise. No tradition escapes politicization, obscurantism and fanaticism. Religious ideas are powerful potions and one can drink to excess. The fact that someone or some group has religious authority does not make them immune to the temptations and corruption of power. The Bible contains some bitter language directed by the likes of Amos and Jeremiah against the priests and Temple leaders of ancient Israel. We have no doctrine of rabbinic infallibility.

The issue of coercion is a difficult one. There need to be rules.

The exodus freed the tribes from bondage, but without Sinai and a covenant they would have remained a quarrelsome, stiff-necked and uncreative lot. The issue is not should there be authority, but what kind of authority. The problem in Israel is not that rabbinic authority is morally unacceptable, in most areas its rules are functional and sensible, but that it was imposed on the people by politicians bargaining for office rather than by a democratic process.

I'm still troubled by your emphasis on the group and the community in a discussion of religion. Why can't religion content itself with quiet worship moments? Why must it get involved in people's lives: Sunday Blue laws, the right-to-life campaign, Federal aid to parochial schools?

How else could it be? The numinous may be perceived only as mystery; but Kedusha, holiness, involves an ethical dimension as well as a purely spiritual one. If God is just and merciful, what is more natural than to assume that one's religion requires the creation of a just society? The Torah contains a vision of God and a day of worship and the rules by which holiness, as the Israelites understood the term, becomes part of the social order: tithing one's field, freeing the slave each sabbatical year, just weights and just measures, a carefully organized judicial system. A vital religious culture cannot help but have significant social impact.

But why is religion so often on the wrong side?

It's not. You only notice the political side of religion when the shoe pinches. Did it bother you that religious leaders like Martin Luther King led the early struggle for racial justice or that rabbis like Stephen Wise and my father led the struggle for a Jewish State in America?

You're saying that the church and synagogue should be in politics. What about the separation of Church and State?

It depends how you define politics. No religious body ought to align itself with the narrow ambitions of a politician or political party; but when it comes to social policy involving the family or international belligerency

no religious group can stay out of politics, at least no religious group which is not satisfied that its goal is private piety. Piety is our attempt to become spiritual, sensitive and at one with God. In the Jewish scheme of things piety is only the first step. The second step is an active life led according to our understanding of God's will. Jews were told again and again: separate not yourself from the community. The rabbinate is an active life, not a withdrawal into secluded piety. Judaism made its religious leaders into the community's legal officers. Moses was not allowed to stay in Midian enjoying a quiet pastoral life with his wife and sons. He was commanded to leave Eden for Egypt and duty.

I once visited an old synagogue in Lisbon. The wall facing the entrance door had perhaps a dozen slots cut into it, each large enough to receive folding money. Each slot had above it a brass plate which bore the label of a service organization: Hachnasat Kallah, society for providing dowries to brides; Bikkur Holim, society for the care of the sick; Hevrah Kaddisha, burial society. The welfare of the community was the business of the community. Clearly, not only was community a primary and sustaining fellowship, but the tradition encouraged the concept of a welfare state. No nonsense about the shiftless poor. The folk who worshipped here often spoke of a wheel of fortune. A roof over one's head and food on the table were the result of hard work and mazzal, good fortune. Today's giver might well be tomorrow's recipient.

There was unhappiness on the lawn. Institutions are not in good repute. I had spoken a good word for the synagogue. For some, institutions stand in the way of "doing my own thing" and are part of the conspiracy of the privileged classes or parents to make me conform.

Another voice from below: All religious institutions have feet of clay. Rabbis and priests aren't saints.

You'll get no argument from me or Judaism. The synagogue has never been treated with fear and trembling. It's a people's place. There is no

part of it you can't enter. Synagogues were small and certainly were not treated as sanctuaries. Between services the worship room became a school or a committee room.

The Temple in Jerusalem had a Holy of Holies which only the High Priest would enter and various courtyards to it, which were reserved for various elite groups. It had associated all the mystery of a place where God is present. The cathedral in many of its forms continues the Temple tradition. The synagogue is an entirely different kind of institution, no priests, no taboos. Anyone may enter, anyone, at least any male, may conduct services. It's a meeting house more than a cathedral, a place where the individual counts. Nine rabbis do not make a minyan. Ten laborers do. We recognize the importance of institutions, but we no longer sanctify them.

Religions never exist apart from people, which is why religious institutions and leaders are never as pure or noble as they should be. They are human, after all. This realism is one of the Torah tradition's most compelling features. There is no image of man become God or God become man. Every Biblical hero is flawed, but heroic nonetheless. When all is said and done the test is not did the human being become a God-like creation but did the human animal succeed in becoming a human being.

You are not the first to point out that religious leaders have feet of clay. "From the smallest to the greatest, they are all greedy for gain: priests and prophet alike, they all act falsely" [Jeremiah]; and this right has been freely, even at times excessively, exercised. Rabbis are not spoiled by automatic deference. Institutions are made up of fallible folk like ourselves, and operate in the confusing world which is where we live. The dream is clean, free of compromise. Reality is dusty and full of gentle and not so gentle contradictions.

Without a vision the religious life could not be compelling or redemptive, but when we think about religion only in ethereal terms, no realistic thinking about social justice of spiritual growth can take place. A religious tradition must include schools, synagogues, libraries, drama, mystical

exercises, retreats, song, liturgy, sermons, welfare service, self-help agencies, and the like, because we are social creatures who live in community. If Judaism were disconnected from people the dream would float irrelevantly high above us in the air. Connected to us inevitably it picks up all our limitations and complications.

The Day of Atonement is celebrated in my congregation with solemn beauty. The service is a glorious one, but it ends; and when it ends, well, the parking lot is a crowded area and that day, because of the size of the congregation, cars are parked all over the place in ways that block swift exit. Each year, at the end of our holiest day, after hours of worship, I find myself voicing aloud the hope that the spirit of the service may last at least until every car has cleared the lot; and each year a few drivers are not able to hold on to calmness and resolve that long.

I was taken by the quote you gave us from Santayana which described each religion as embracing "a special and surprising word." You're making religion sound fairly natural. I've always thought of the religious teaching as surprising. God surprised Israel with His commands at Sinai. God surprised Moses at the Burning Bush with His command to go back to Egypt. Revelation suggests the unexpected idea. Aren't religion and faith really beyond reason?

There is no such thing as a wholly reasonable faith. Faith is a personal response to need. Religion is a precipitate of the needs of many. After we have the faith we may reason about it. If faith is not to run away with us and become that monstrosity we call fanaticism, we must reason about it, but at the base of every faith and every religion lies a set of axioms, improvable assumptions about human dignity, human worth, love, society, value, consciousness, purpose, the future, life or death, what lies beyond the grave.

Religious questions are not cool questions which are asked calmly and answered dispassionately. There is tremendous psychic energy behind the

religious quest and, once we have answers that satisfy us, we do not readily let loose of them. Redemptive ideas integrate our personality and provide strength and sanity. We gamble our lives upon them. It would be madness to let go, which is why we humans tend to be most unreasonable in this area and why otherwise reasonable folk can be close-minded when it comes to religious questions.

Imagine a Martian, one who is not like us, come among us. Imagine that sometime during his visit he reads a history of Europe's Jews. Surely, he would shake his head sadly over the long chronicle of people penned into a ghetto, made to wear a badge which declared them as pariahs, and repeatedly beaten and massacred by Crusader and Cossack. If I were this Martian, I would wonder why these Jews did not get out from under. At least until the Nazi period they could have done so simply by accepting baptism. Holy water cannot drown the soul. Wouldn't they have believed whatever they wanted to believe after baptism as before? Had they been baptized they would have survived and they might have been accepted into the opportunity which society provided. If questions of religion were cool issues, mass conversion would have been the order of the day.

Why wasn't it?

Some Jews, the more realistic, sensed that conversion would not lead to acceptance. In the minds of many the convert would remain a Jew, and so it happened. Those who converted were segregated out as New Christians and welcomed to the not-so-king ministrations of the Inquisition. Some remained Jews out of political calculation, but most held fast because they could not have lived with themselves if they had done otherwise. To convert would have been to deny all of the teachings which they felt/knew to be redemptive and to adopt a set of sacred symbols which did not carry the necessary reassurance with them, to give up their sense of dignity, their sense of purpose, their confidence in God's reward - all that had meaning for them and gave coherence to their lives.

You smile, but are we that different? If our vaunted security, prosperity and power were to disappear, if suddenly we were ruled by those who demanded that we agree with their economic ideologies and organize our lives by their political theories; we, too, might make a desperate stand for the values, the dignity, the sense of self which we now take for granted. Our defiance might be hapless, but there are values each of us cannot and will not compromise.

Would it really have mattered? If everyone has a religion, does it matter that we belong to one or another?

Religion is not good. Religion is not bad. Religion simply is. Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Leninism, Maoism, Naziism and yes, the Moonies and the People's Temple, each present a set of redemptive answers and a series of reinforcing rituals which provide coherence and a sense of sanctified purpose to communicants. Each is a religion and, obviously, we would pass quite different judgments on each. Ours is not the question of belonging or no, we all "belong". The live questions are "where" and "with whom" and "to what degree". Everyone is religiously involved: some with the traditional religions of the West; others with cults; others with economic or political ideologies; others with the small group of true believers who dot our open society. It follows that it is a matter of some consequence what tradition you affiliate with and what your group does with the traditions they inherit.

Why? Everyone has a right to believe what they want to believe.

You cannot stop a person from believing errant nonsense, but religions impact significantly on their communicants and must be judged by these consequences. Pragmatic judgments can be made, indeed, must be made. A religious tradition, like Naziism which excites the blood lust, feeds an imperialist national ego, lauds a racist myth and subordinates man to a Feuhrer clearly is pernicious. A religious tradition like Judaism, which encourages moral discipline, social justice, the cultivation of the mind, an individual's freedom under God and the ties of human fellowship has much to command

it. A religious tradition can reverence life or like Shintoism ennoble suicide. A religion like Buddhism can distinguish sharply between worldliness and spirituality and encourage asceticism and withdrawal or, like Judaism, seek to sanctify the everyday. Traditions like classic Christianity and Islam can teach the damnation of non-communicants or, like Judaism, downplay the image of heaven as a restricted subdivision.

Some years ago a campaign was sponsored by the National Advertising Council to promote religion in American life. Across the land billboards went up which featured the motto: "It matters not where you go on Sunday, just go." In the background, behind the legend, you could see a dome, a spire and a number of other distinguishable ecclesiastical roof lines. In point of fact, it matters a great deal with what religion you affiliate and also with what group within the religious polity. The religion of the Crusaders was the same, yet quite different, from that of Francis of Assissi. Liberal Judaism differs in emphasis and assumption from the ultra-orthodox of Israel who hurl anathemas at deviationists and refuse to allow post mortems on their dead. It mattered a great deal that nine hundred and some who drank the cyanide in Jonestown belonged to the People's Temple and not to another Disciples of Christ congregation.

I decided to teach my group a Hebrew phrase, <u>le'havdil</u>, to distinguish. In common speech when someone suggested that there were differences in quality or kind between phenomena of the same order he said <u>le'havdil</u>. So the sentence: Jim Jones and <u>le-havdil</u> Martin Luther King were ministers in the Civil Rights Movement; or the Jonestown commune and <u>le-havdil</u> an Israeli kibbutz are rural utopian communes. One must constantly make <u>le-havdil</u> judgments in religious matters. When the People's Temple, Rev. Jones' ill-fated church, began in Indianapolis it began as a community of dedicated folk who believed in participatory democracy, integration and utopian communism, ideas very much in line with the tenets of mainline Protestantism's social gospel. As that group moved theologically and geographically, it was worth a member's

life to be able to say: the community is no longer what it was, I must separate myself.

We talked on a bit about Guiana, cyanide and religion.

When the mass suicides at Jonestown took place the media recognized the perversity of this church but, caught up in a culture which automatically accords approval to anything labeled religion, they sought to continue this pattern by making a distinction, in this case without merit, between cult and religion.

Cult has become a pejorative term ever at hand to describe activities which involve people and traditions of which the society does not approve: the Moonies, the Church of God, the People's Temple. Religion is a term reserved for people and traditions we approve: Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism. Yet, until the fatal day when the community drank cyanide, the People's Temple remained an accredited member of a mainline Protestant denomination. The difference between a cult and a religion is not the distinction between a beneficial religious enterprise and a pathological one, one would hardly call Naziism a cult; but rather a distinction of intensity. Cults are groups of religious people who are a little hotter about their faith than ordinary congregations. Cultists care desperately. Most religious folk care quietly. The cults make religious teachings the unmediated focus of their lives while most who are affiliated with the mainline congregations or with the various civic religions filter religious commitment through a grid of prudence. The Talmud sages sometimes warned: "Be not righteous overmuch."

Cults have emerged in every religious tradition and in every age because there are always those who are not satisfied with familiar institutional forms which are, they hold, always being compromised because they cater to the spiritual limitations of ordinary people. Like sun spots, cults signal an eruption of spiritual energy: sometimes there are more eruptions and sometimes less, but there is always an outflow of power from the source. Whenever the mainline traditions cool down, or whenever the society is convulsed, cults

appear bearing a compelling dream, demanding a transvaluation of values, a new commitment which will hasten salvation. Most cults, like Jonah's gourd, appear one night and disappear the next. Some abort. Some explode. A few emerge and become mainline religions. When Jesus and his disciples wandered about the Galilee the citizens of Tiberias dismissed them as bizarre cultists who believed that the world was about to end and who, because they were busy preparing for Judgment Day, refused to attend to their family, civic and business responsibilities. At the same time, when the Pharisees refused to eat at any other table but one set by their own, they, too, were put down as cultists who set pretensions to holiness above the normal courtesies of hospitality, and even the ties of family. We are not the first age to suffer a cult explosion.

Cult people are intense. Most religionists balance conviction with prudence. Cults are led by prophets who have heard God. The mainline churches are led by pastors who have read about those who have heard God. A cultist's religious life is all-consuming. Most folk have a family life and work as well as religious interests. The cultist says: 'if I don't act now it will be too late'. Most of us feel that the world will go on whatever we do religiously and that our children need to be fed and educated as they grow up.

Cults are functional or dangerous, depending on the beliefs around which the communicants have rallied, the leader who gains authority, and what subsequent generations make of their inheritance. Some are better, some worse, but all suffer from all the dangers associated with excess and zeal. Judaism has not been immune to zealous excess. The messianic cult of the Sabbateans come to mind; but untrammeled zeal has never been held up as an absolute virtue. The mind has a major role to play. The Torah tradition refused to exalt spontaneity or feeling or a radical anti-rationalism. No theology was justified precisely because it seemed patently absurd. According to scripture, "only fools scorn wisdom and discipline" (Prov. 1-7).

But Judaism claims to be based on revelation. Moses received the Commandments on Mount Sinai and all that. What else is this but anti-rationalism?

Anti-rationalism is an all pervasive attitude. Sinai stands for the original insights which, like all basic affirmations about life, cannot be proven. Once these were in place, once there was a basis for thought, reason and experience, commentary rather than prophecy, became the means by which the Torah tradition emerged. Some religious traditions demand absolute submission and others rather welcome the trained and inquisitive mind: the Torah tradition falls into that latter category. The mind was seen as a divine gift. Among the petitions of the daily service is one which read: "Favor us, O Lord, with knowledge, understanding and discernment. Praised be You, O Lord, gracious Giver of knowledge." A tradition which says "the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath" has built an attitude of restraint which warns the believer not to set humanity aside out of zeal for some religious practice.

This sounds reasonable, but explain to me why we read every Yom Kippur the story of God's demand that Abraham sacrifice his son Isaac and Abraham's acquiescence. Who but one who has set aside reason and good sense, not to speak of fatherly feeling, would have agreed to such a sacrifice? I wouldn't call his act balanced or sane.

The Protestant theologian and early existentialist, Soren Kierkegaard, in his classic book, Either/Or, used this story to illustrate his contention that the man of faith must be prepared to put aside not only family feeling but his sense of morality when he hears the commanding voice. Kierkegaard held that the demands of faith are unconditional and that the way of salvation required a total commitment to the spirit of God as it moved within the human soul. The believer must be prepared to risk all: family, security, position. There is high drama in bold commitment; but, as you rightly suggest,

you can become a danger to yourself and others. Kierkegaard calls this attitude "a teleological suspension of the ethical", and I confess that his whole approach sends shivers down my spine. How does anyone who is absolutely convinced of the rightness of his position know that it is right or, to use his symbolic terms, that God, not Satan, has spoken to him?

Why then do we read this story on Yom Kippur?

This is our crucifixion story. Our tradition looked on the Akedah as a once and only event, which forever changed the course of human history. Jesus' death presumedly atoned for Adam's sin and opened the way of salvation to the believer. Abraham's loyalty to God's commend, his willingness to put his beloved son to death, gained the merit which earned for Abraham and his descendants, Israel, the covenant. Something new and wonderful enters Jewish history - a covenant with God which included the provision that such a test would never again be demanded. "It is not too hard for you." On Yom Kippur when we are most conscious of sins we are reminded that repentance and salvation are available, in part because of Abraham's spiritual heroism, Were it not for the covenant we would not know what is right or be oonfident that God, in fact, cares. Were it not for Abraham's word our redemptive vision would not have arrived.

Christianity begins in the Cross. Judaism begins with the Akedah. Both represent historic events understood mythically. In our case, having measured up to the test, Abraham merits for himself and his heirs a special relationship with God and out of that relationship comes Judaism's special promise. The conclusion of this story is the message. The son need not be sacrificed. Life is not hopeless. A surrogate is made to appear, a ram, caught by its horns in the nearby thicket. According to popular folklore, after Abraham sacrificed the ram, its horns were hidden and will remain so until they they are sounded to announce the messiah. One of the Talmudic sages was asked: why do we sound the shofar on Yom Kippur? His answer suggests precisely this redemptive power: God said, 'blow the shofar that I

may remember for you the binding of Isaac. When I do I shall consider it as if you had bound yourselves before Me.' The possibility of redemption exists and we don't have to prove our worth in such extreme ways.

The religious need is universal. Everyone has a religion but not everyone appropriates a faith of great intensity. Some share calmly their culture's religion and others are aflame with convictions which tend to make more comfortable religionists uncomfortable. Often, these intense religionists are condemned as fanatics, but I find the label a bit disturbing. One man's fanaticism is another's principle. I find that I tend to label somebody a fanatic when I cannot argue him around to my point of view. We face here a critical and never fully resolvable religious question. If we believe that there are principles in life, and most of us do, at what point do commitment and principle add up to fanaticism? I'll give you a traditional Jewish answer: when the consequences for the group or the society are dysfunctional or dangerous. There have been Jewish faith healers, but the tradition has always praised medicine and insisted that the expert be consulted. There is a strong fatalist trend in popular Judaism. It's <u>beshert</u>, but there is an even stronger emphasis on responsibility for one's life and community.

The awareness that faith can lead to fanaticism stops many at the door of the traditional religions; prudent folk shun excess, preferring Aristotle's rule of the Golden Mean: everything in moderation. Bertrand Russell once described Aristotle's rule as the perfect out for the respectable, middle-aged who use its cautions to repress the ardours and enthusiasms of the young. If redemption depends on sacrificial living can I be satisfied with the rule of cautious prudence? Judaism has and has had its fanatics. Some we revere: Jeremiah, Akiba, Eliezer Ben Yehudah. Others we are less certain of: Daniel, Shabbatai Tzvi, the Neturei Karta. Again, it's a case of by their deeds shall you know them.

To many the energy which surges around and within any religion is disturbing. But it's there because religion is not a child's game or mere

pageantry, but our gamble that our existence and that of our society has meaning. The resurgence of powerful religious energies has been one of the features of this century. Ireland, Iran, Libya, yes, and Israel, offer cases in point. When we add the materialist ideologies to the list of world religions we can see that this has been a remarkable religious century featuring the conversion of hundreds of millions to Communism and Maoism. Nor is this phenomenon limited to backward countries. Here in America we have seen Billy Graham fill his football stadia, an explosion of cults and a geometric increase in the number of born-again Christians.

Judaism has been, and is, full of religious energy, capable of sparking self-discipline and passion. If our fanatics have rarely put others to the sword this may be explained by the fact that we, a minority, were not allowed to do so. Since power corrupts, being part of a persecuted minority is in many ways good for the soul.

Faith is not good. Faith is not bad. Faith simply is. We have difficult choices to make.

Chapter 3

CAN THE LEOPARD CHANGE ITS SPOTS?

Underlying much of the conversation was an assumption that each could take a good look at Judaism and decide whether to come along or go elsewhere. They seemed to think you could switch religions as you might turn on or off a light switch. Presumedly, once they had resolved the question, to be or not to be, they would act on that decision and that would be that.

No way. Ask a convert. Most will testify to a good bit of guilt, cultural awkwardness and a nagging sense of being adrift. "I can't help it, I miss Christmas" or "I checked the wrong box at last fall's registration before I remembered." I remember the convert who told me: "I feel more at home each year but I have never ceased expecting the collection plate." You can experience a similar sense of strangeness when the change is simply from a familiar branch of Judaism to another. A recently married man who had been raised in a traditional congregation and had joined his wife's synagogue told me: "I agree intellectually with the Reform position but I'll never get used to a woman rabbi." My college adviser, and perhaps the most learned Jewish philosopher of his day, Harry Austryn Wolfson, suffered stomach pains when he first began to eat in his non-kosher rooming house, and for months never associated the pain with his break with long familiar custom.

The Jesuits were reputed to claim that if they could form a child during the first six years of its life, the adult would never shake off their influence. The claim may be apocryphal and, like the Biblical proverb, "train up a child in the way he should go and he will follow you the rest of his life", certainly overstates the case; but no one should minimize the power of conditioning. Around every synagogue you will find a cluster of spiritual returnees, they are familiarly called <u>baalei teshuvah</u>, usually middle-aged persons who for years went their way but now feel a need to come in out of the secular cold.

To a surprising extent we are what our environment allows us to be. We speak the language of our times and native community. We learn the lessons which the community prescribes. We take over the habits of our peers and, inevitably, share many of their interests. We tend to feel comfortable only when we are at home among those whose reactions and signals we instinctively understand. The cultural imprint is deeply etched and change does not come easily. If, as adults, we are forced to learn and use another language, generally we either use it too formally or speak it with an accent.

However disconcerting the thought, no one completely shakes off the influence of home and neighborhood. The press reported recently on a man named Davis who had renounced his United States citizenship some thirty years ago, having decided to become a citizen of the world; and now wants to come home. To achieve this end he has filed a suit to recover his papers. The emotional hold of our early patterns may explain why many instinctively, and often against their better judgment, tend to doubt the authenticity of conversion.. I cannot help noticing that some who abandon the Torah tradition for the Christian gospel try to create synagogue-type institutions where the old forms can be maintained albeit with Christ as an add-on. In the early days of the Russian and Chinese revolution children brought up in once privileged homes were never free of the suspicion that they were "capitalist roaders."

Once we accept the concept of religion as embodying a society's dynamic understanding of the way of redemption rather than a set of disembodied doctrines, and of faith as the individual's appropriation of elements of his culture's religion, the absurdity of treating religious decisions as purely theoretical questions becomes apparent. To say, "when it's time I'll make up my mind", is to be an innocent. Your mind is already caught in an invisible but potent web of conditioning. Margaret Mead once told me that need drives the emigrant abroad and loneliness drives him back home. The peasants who

moved from their country village to the city ghetto or from Eastern Europe to the Pennsylvania coal mines did so to escape poverty. Many prospered, but few felt rooted. A considerable number, once their children were safely on their way, returned to the old country to retire and die in the familiar world of their youth.

I remember a convert: liberal, well-read, sure that her nominal Christian upbringing was no impediment to a full partnership in the Jewish life of her husband-to-be who told me before her conversion: "I never went to Sunday School. My family weren't church folk. I've always believed in God but never believed the Christ myth. I have no theological problems with becoming Jewish." Some years later she came and asked to be deconverted. I told her that no such ceremony existed; and that, in any case, it would not be my place to organize one; but we kept talking, in part because she was so determined that I understand. "I don't want to become a Christian. I don't believe in the Cross, but I find I can't give up Easter and Christmas and that I somehow feel disloyal to my parents." The call of the cradle Faith is a compelling, often an unremitting, summons.

Given the psychological and emotional wrench involved in emigration or conversion, it would seem wise to examine the possibilities of one's own tradition before seeking to exchange it. Many in a culture such as ours, which emphasizes self-determination, want to put some distance between ourselves and our home in order to be able to examine critically our purposes and loyalties. Our parents tend to agree in this and encourage us to go away to school or work out of town for just that reason; but when you are away you will still carry your home in your soul. The value of being away is not that we are free of our conditioning, but that we must face each day's decisions on our own.

A challenge came from the benches. You speak of conditioning. I come from a home where Judaism was a word, not a way of life. You say becoming Jewish can make a difference but I don't see it - not in my home, not

in the way we live. Mind you, we live nicely and are decent folk, but the occasional candle-lighting seems to have nothing to do with the character of my home or my parents' lives.

In our heterogeneous society there are such homes. Israel may be discussed. A donation is given each year to the United Jewish Appeal. When daughter marries or grandfather dies a rabbi, otherwise unknown, will appear on the scene. Yet, Judaism is not taken seriously and it's hard for those raised in such an environment to recognize what is really at stake in the religious enterprise. For such there is little tension in leaving the religious label since it has never represented a vital force, since their soul has not been sensitized to the mystery and colour, not to speak of the vision and teaching of Jewish life. I've used the word binding before. For these the problem of developing a meaningful Jewish religious life involves learning something almost altogether new. Institutes like this one, where the conversation includes testimony from those to whom being Jewish is significant and where there is a warm and informal Sabbath service, are often eye-openers to the not-yet Jewishly alive Jew. I remember another institute where a camper told me: 'I had never met anyone before who took Judaism seriously.'

My parents never talk about what they believe. They talk about Israel, anti-semitism, Soviet Jewry, synagogue politics, but never about faith.

Another voice: I went to a Wednesday night service at a local church. People got up from the congregation and told how they had found Jesus. I have never heard such talk at one of our services.

To Christians, the moment of awareness and acceptance is crucial; to Jews the pattern of daily life is crucial. You don't become a Jew by virtue of a mystical experience, but rather, by living as a Jew. Still, the prevailing reticence needs examining. I don't claim fully to understand it. For some reticence masks theological doubts. They are active in the Jewish community and do not want their involvement or judgment questioned because

they are not true believers. Then there is the cultural fact that we are not accustomed to making public testimonies, never confess to anyone but God. Nor do we prove ourselves worthy of membership by a public affirmation of faith. A Jew is a Jew. Whatever the reasons for our reticence, they are deeply cultural and reinforced by the form our tradition took. But I think living in the emotionally loose culture we do, some of that uptightness is beginning to disappear.

But that doesn't explain why my parents never talked about God with me and never asked to hear my prayers when I was a child. When the Confirmation class went to services, they left me out at the door and picked me up afterwards.

To be Jewish is to belong to a community of fate, only part of which is also a community of faith. On an existential level our identity derives primarily from our involvement in the ongoing destiny of the Jewish people. Some believe and practice traditionally. Others believe and practice non-traditionally; and some believe and practice minimally; but all are bound together by the pressures of history and all must confront, at least minimally, the pressures of tradition. Your parents may not talk to you about worship; but they sent you to religious school.

A testimony brought me up short. My home may not be an old-fashioned home with two sets of dishes, my mother did not wear a sheitel, but there is a mezuzah on the door and a Jewish atmosphere throughout. We have adopted a Russian emigrant family who celebrate the holidays with us. My folks are active in the congregation and several Jewish organizations. They took me to Israel for my Bar Mitzvah. When grandfather died we sat <u>shivah</u>. Others nodded.

The point was well taken. The Jewish community shows all the heterogenity of the larger society: Reform, Conservative, Orthodox; affiliated-unaffiliated; active-indifferent; learned-uninformed; some have models to pattern themselves after or rebel against; others can only guess at what becoming

Jewish involves.

I'm surprised the whole ball of wax doesn't explode.

So am I sometimes, but then I remember that conformity has never been our thing. There were Sadducees, Pharisees, Essenes, Zealots, Hasidim, Apocalyptics, , Samaritans during the last days of the Temple in Jerusalem. The Israelite congregation was an amalgam of tribes, according to tradition twelve, each independent, yet bound together by where they had been, Egypt, and where they were going, The Promised Land.

A pause. A voice. What makes a Jew a Jew?

According to rabbinic law, a Jew is a person born to a Jewish mother or one who converts. This minimalist definition reflects ancient legal practice. The Hebrews practiced a modest form of polygamy. A rule of precedence according to maternal descent was required to settle questions of inheritence and precedence among the many sons of a chief. In real life, we become a Jew in the same way that anyone becomes an American citizen by being born to parents who are citizens. Beyond this there is conversion which parallels the process of acquiring citizenship through naturalization. Though it exhudes an antique flavor, I rather like the law's matter-of-factness; despite all our pretensions to being free spirits, in the final analysis we are in large measure what our early environment allows us to be and mothers have a lot to do with that environment.

What makes a Jew come alive as a Jew?

Some experience or feeling may trigger a decision to try Judaism on for size. A member of my class told me recently that he loved the songs and chants but had never payed much attention to the liturgy. 'It bored me. I developed the art of inattention. Then one day a word got through. I still don't know why and I began to listen and care'. I suggested it might not have been a word at all, but the power of the religiously familiar. While I was in England on a sabbatical a new Book of Common Prayer was introduced by the Church of England. The papers were full of comments and

criticism and I was struck by how much of negative comment came from those who rarely went to church. The old service was familiar, admittedly it was written in a language Englishmen no longer speak, but, so one letter went: "The virtue of the modern idiom cannot take the place of words whose associations are so much richer than their surface meanings."

The binding moment cannot be predicted. Emotion plays a key role; but it is to the everlasting credit of our religious leaders that they were unwilling to focus Judaism on feeling, program the highs, prey on people's emotional needs and susceptibilities; deep in our culture lies a profound distrust of feeling cut loose from its moorings in a defining tradition. What happens when we come down from the high? Are reborn Christians really better Christians? Judaism takes a more patient approach: schooling, as well as experience; a fixed liturgy as well as testimonies and prayers spoken under the spirit. The proof of Judaism is not the witness of someone who feels happier for having accepted the Torah, but whether a Torah envolved life is a more coherent and empathetic life.

Whether native-born or a convert, one develops a Jewish identity through a process which combines feeling, knowledge and familierity. Growing up as a Jew requires learning and experience. Conversion involves a rather lengthy process of reading, discussion and the development of new religious patterns. We do not accept a convert simply because he testifies that he has seen the Jewish light. We are what we choose to become. The right religion will not suddenly hit you over the head. A meaningful religious life will not simply happen. You must experience as well as think. To decide you are not unhappy as a Jew and do nothing about becoming an active Jew is a sterile pose. You can't come to services one Sabbath after years of absence and demand instant exaltation. To the question, where is God, a sage answered: "Wherever man lets him in." To the question: How can I have a lively faith, I would answer, "let it in."

I thought Bar Mitzvah was the time you became a Jew.

Bar/Bat Mitzvah are rites of passage. Every society has some such test or performance, which signify the end of childhood and admission into the adult community. Indian braves were sent out to survive in the forest. English squires knelt before the sword they would wield as knights and were tested on their skill with it. The young Jew mastered the Torah and read from it. He could now perform certain duties formerly reserved for adults, but he had been a Jew since, at his circumcision, he was welcomed into the covenant of Abraham, our Father. This developmental approach differs from the Christian way which focuses on a single act of acceptance: coming alive as a Christian, accepting the Christ. When Paul denied the authority of Torah law he was not objecting to specific rituals; rather, he was struggling to free himself of the grip of an all-embracing culture by emphasizing a transforming and liberating experience, faith under the power of the spirit, rather than on the less dramatic processes of faith under the control of learning and covenant. Some Jews have known the power of such moments of transformation. The Biblical prototype is Moses when he meets God and his fears at the Burning Bush and he hears the commanding voice which transforms his life; but Judaism has never made our ability to testify to a conversion experience, to a religious high, an absolute requirement of belonging. Most Jews come alive as Jews by Jewing: lighting Chanukkah lights, singing Hatikvah and Jerusalem the Golden, joining in the synagogue chant or working in the Jewish community.

It happened to me at the Wall. It was dark. The sun gave Jerusalem's rose stone a pastel sheen. A few old Jews were davenning. I don't know what happened, but suddenly the whole skein of our history came alive.

Can one suddenly feel part of a different religion? But I'm getting ahead of myself. Can the leopard decide one day to shed his spots and suddenly become a different looking animal? The chameleon can easily take on the coloration of the surroundings. Can we?

"We praise You O Lord our God who chose us from among all Peoples."

Obviously, we can put on the dress and develop the manners of other groups, but are our feelings, our soul, costumes which can be readily changed? The answer would seem to be: not easily. Our society is full of folk who have given up formal affiliation but who take an active interest in Israel or some Jewish agency or who simply can't let go of the Jewish problem. An old Stalinist, Isaac Deutscher, recently wrote an autobiography with the revealing title, The Non-Jewish Jew. As a youth Deutscher denounced the synagogue and converted to Communism, but remained fiercely proud of being heir of a tradition of prophetic outrage at injustice. I have a philosopher friend who is a confirmed atheist and an indefatigable religious explorer. Henry has attended services in Indian temples and Shinto shrines, but has not been in a synagogue since his Bar Mitzvah. "I don't like to be tied down." He has stayed away, but he just happened to take his last sabbatical at the Hebrew University and is profoundly involved with the political security of the State of Israel.

There is another reason the leopard can't change his spots: we expect a leopard to have spots. Many German Jews felt more European and German than Jewish, but most Germans knew them only as Jews. Like it or not, the Jewish people play a major role in the religious myths of Muslims and Christians; and attitudes bred by these myths are projected on to the Jew, the non-Jewish Jew and the no-longer-Jewish Jew. To traditional Christians Jews are the once-chosen people who proved to be deaf and blind to the new dispensation and who were punished for their obstinacy by God when He sentenced them to wander endlessly over the face of the globe. Many add that in End Time the blinders will fall from Jewish eyes and our conversion will presage the Second Coming. Over time the myth of the once chosen, now criminal, developed many an imaginative image, the wandering Jew, the Christ killer, a people set aside by God for punishment; Shylock, subversive, the Jew as Communist, the Jew as capitalist, the secret cabinet of the Elders of Zion; and all these myths were reinforced by that most ignorant claim of

competitive religions, that we worship a stern, loveless deity who demands obedience and cares only about legal minutia.

At first Mohammed had great hopes that the Jews of Arabia would accept his prophecies and apostolate. When the Jews of the Hejaz did not, Mohammed turned the sword of Islam against them and ordered that they be rooted out of Arabia, and his anti-Jewish fulminations came to be enshrined in The Koran. Islam sees the Jews as possessing a botched version of revelation, descendants of the first people to refuse the message of Mohammed, a people who may be tolerated outside of Arabia but who must be kept subordinate. In Muslim countries the Jew was an outsider, made to wear distinguishing clothes so that the faithful would always be conscious of the fact that his presence was a privilege, not a right. Today in Arab lands Jews suffer the added charge of having had the effrontery to claim a piece of the Islamic Kingdom as their own. Fed by the inability to destroy Israel by force, the medieval myths of Islam are in full cry.

The power of mythic identification can hardly be exaggerated. If a Christopher and a Samuel had been classmates in a Berlin gymnasium during the 1920's they might have played together every day, but Germany's politics would have seen to it that one would become a victim while the other would end up, willingly or passively, supporting Samuel's murderers.

In a recent poll ninety percent of the respondents identified Karl Marx as a Jew. In 1492 the long crusade to reconquer Spain from the Moors finally succeeded; and that same year Ferdinand and Isabella, as rulers of a united and Catholic Spain, gave their Jews the cruel choice of baptism or death. Those who were sprinkled with holy water found that they were not accepted as Christians but labeled as New Christians and still treated as outsiders. Nor was this a passing phenomenon. It lasted for nearly two centuries during which their faith was regularly and rigorously reviewed by the Inquisition.

In Nazi Germany the children of a Lutheran father and his pious wife

were classified as Jews if two of their grandparents had been Jews. In the Soviet Union children of Jewish heroes of the revolution remain Jews by nationality, whatever the fervor of their membership in the Communist Part; and, increasingly, as the Soviets woo the Arab world, are made to suffer from educational and job restrictions. Jewish enrollment in Russia's universities has been severely restricted and careers in diplomacy, the official ranks of the army and in advanced physics are fields closed to them.

Anti-semitism is a problem Jews can do little about; but no one likes to admit impotence and those who are persecuted are often half-convinced by the majority they are at fault. I got the question I expected: Aren't we at fault? No one likes those who feel superior.

Of all the familiar concepts of Judaism, the most often and scathingly attacked has been the theme of the Chosen People. Those who like us none too well would turn the victims of racism into racists. Many dismiss the notion as sheer arrogance. Reference is made to the terrible price our world has paid for various imbecilic claims about the existence of a master race which, presumedly, has the right to have its way in all things. Let's at least be clear about the problem, whatever else it is or is not. The Chosen People concept is not a racial one. The law is specific: the Jewish community is an open community. A Jew is a Jew by virtue of birth or conversion, and the convert is the full equal of one born a Jew. The Biblical tradition named Ruth, a convert, as the great-grandmother of King David and, by inference, direct ancestor of the Messiah. The Torah tradition does not claim that Jews are biologically superior. Abraham was a semi-nomad of no particular nobility. "A wandering Aramean was my father." The tribes whom Moses led out of Egypt are described as an asafsuf, an undistinguished motley. The Bible does not reproduce any myth parallel to one common among ancient peoples, that they or their kings were descendants of the gods. Our myths do not make us children of the gods, or even descendants of some ancient royal house. Rather, they describe us as descendants of slaves, undistinguished. To be

"We praise You O Lord our God who chose us from among all peoples."

sure, some Jews have felt superior but the tradition provides precious little support to their claims and an occasional display of chauvinism simply testifies to the fact that Jews, too, are human. The more the outside world derided the Jew, the more pride became a survival mechanism and it was often hard to separate pride in being worthy of a special relationship with God from a simplistic pride in one's own simply because they are our own. A strong ego is as important to a people as to a person. In Eastern Europe Jews were as impoverished as the peasantry but they were literate. Nor was the paradox lost on the Jew that Christians, whose polemicists delight to scoff at the Chosen People concept, rousingly claimed that the faithful were the New Israel, specially beloved of God, and that only those who join the new faith would be saved. The Torah tradition never had the chutzpah to claim that Heaven was a restricted subdivision.

Sometime ago I wrote A History of Judaism, and naturally, someone asked why I had bothered. Part of the answer lies in the intrinsic fascination of our history. We are a long-lived people who have been around almost as long as the Chinese and longer than anybody else in the western world. We have not only been around but highly visible. Many folk have been around for millenia: the bedouins, for instance, but they have remained anonymous. Bedouins come and bedouins go and leave no trace behind. By contrast Jews have provided the basic themes of Western religion to Western man and a significant percentage of Nobel Prize winners. Someone said, "Jews are like everyone else, only more so." It is the "and more so" that makes us interesting. Even those who do not like us admit our significance. Indeed, those who locate the root of prejudice in the acts of those against whom the prejudice is directed sometimes argue that jealousy of our energies and abilities fuels anti-semitism.

The special and surprising message of each religion suggests that its community must exhibit certain unlike qualities. The miracle of election, God's gracious concern for us, stands at the beginning of the Jew's self

understanding. Our myth, if you will, has two parts: God's choice and our acceptance. We were not chosen by a divine whim, but so that God would have a national commitment to the Torah and there would have been no election if Israel had not accepted God's commitment.

Israel's special relationship with God was not a genetic accident or an impromptu happening, but an historic event consequent on the nation's acceptance of the Torah. Sinai is Jewish shorthand for the enabling moment when the covenant was proclaimed and affirmed, when Israel took to itself "the special and surprising word." At Sinai Israel did not accept God. God does not need acceptance. Rather, God offered Israel a covenant and Israel accepted its terms. Just as there are binding moments when our religion comes alive; Sinai was a binding moment when the way came alive and a new relationship between God and Israel was inaugurated: "God gave His word to Israel, and Israel gave its word of honor to God" (Heschel) Israel accepted this set of rules and duties which defined the way. Whether we accept the conventional image of a popular acclamation at Sinai of the whole Torah or understand the Torah as a compilation of Divine Instruction given at various times and places, the fact remains that Sinai symbolizes the critical moment when the tribes ceased to be among the anonymous clans of black-tented bedouin shepherds who ranged across the Fertile Crescent and become a people of significance to themselves and to civilization.

A hundred years ago non-Jews used to say "how odd of God to choose the Jews." The response, I guess, is "how odd the Jews one God did choose." Our significance begins with Sinai, the moment of choice or of being chosen, both the active verb and the passive verb apply. Whether we were chosen by God for His own reason as traditional theology has it, or we chose to serve God as humanists prefer to say, no one denies that Jews felt chosen and obligated, and that this people, burdened now with a sense of mission, set out on a distinctive road and have had a distinguished career.

There are Jews who find it difficult to repeat the old prayer formula: "We praise You O Lord our God who chose us from among all peoples."

Aren't all people equal both genetically and in the sight of God? I confess I am not much troubled by this phrase. I don't like arrogance, but I like insignificance even less. Anonymous people lead vague lives. Somehow, a family or a community whose citizens feel a special obligation, what the French used to call noblesse oblige, generally do have an extraordinary impact on their communities. I do not mean that all Jews have been good, saintly or necessarily conscious of a high obligation; far from it. Nor do I suggest that all Jews have been creative or wise. We have had our fools and our fanatics. I mean simply that as an historic people we have internalized a sense of historic purpose and spun out a remarkably healthy and ennobling pattern of human relationships,and that a minority among us have concerned themselves with issues of paramount concern and witnessed by their lives to God's will. A part of the reason that you write a history of Judaism is simply that it is significant.

To be a Jew is to feel significantly different. I rejoice in this sense of significance. I would not like to feel that I was simply human flotsam being tossed about on a restless ocean. The Chosen People concept raises a people's consciousness of its potential, to use the modern jargon; and lifts up a community's pride in its past and present. Jews sensed that Israel plays a role in God's plans, and the sense of being special has always made the Jew a bit self-conscious and that's not necessarily bad. Sociologists often use a concept which they anomie. Anomie comes from the same root as anonymous and is used to describe the fact that when a person is not known to his neighbors he will act less circumspectly than if he might be recognized. We act differently in a mob and at a family outing. Jews could never let down because God and the world were watching. The tradition said it simply. Chosenness and Torah are concepts which are regularly paired. Before the Torah is read this age-old blessing is recited: "Praised be You, O Lord our God, Who has chosen us from among all people and has given

us this Torah, praised You, O God, Giver of the Torah." I have always thought the Chosen People concept was the way Jews said to themselves what careful parents tell their children: 'just because everyone does it, doesn't make it right. I didn't raise you to be ordinary.' The founding myth ties election to covenant. Chosenness imposes extra obligations. ~~Bound to the covenant, chosenness imposes extra obligations~~. Bound to the covenant, Jews could not be satisfied with the ordinary compromises. We are chosen to live by the Torah traditions. Israel's being chosen entailed special duties which are not an obligation on others and Israel is subjected to much more rigorous standards.

Chosenness provides a satisfying sense of significance, but it can also cause frustration. Those who want only to be left alone to enjoy their backyards and a beer want no part of a special destiny whose demands pull them away from the quiet and comfortable life. Perhaps that's why election has never been a popular idea in suburbia.

I appreciate being chosen into our particular historic culture as a command not to settle for the shabby and the ordinary. You can't be anonymous as a Jew - at least it's hard to be.

The concept of covenant (berit) seems to have borrowed from the forms of feudal relationship common in the ancient Middle East. When a king conquered another city-state he normalized the situation with a covenant treaty which established the terms of the new master-vassal relationship. Such a document began by announcing the victor's power and the main body of the text stipulated the duties and taxes he would expect of his vassal. It concluded by promising protection as long as the terms were faithfully abided and by threatening condign punishment if either party reneged. The victor set the terms, but the covenant was not activated until the vassal accepted them.

The first covenant, a simple document of fealty, promise and protection, was announced to Abraham. The full covenant, with all the rules

which must be accepted was announced to Israel at Sinai by the King of Kings and there acclaimed by Israel, His servants, acclaimed not only for their day but for all time. The rite of reading from the covenant document, the Torah, in the synagogue symbolized the continuing efficacy of this special relationship: the renewal of God's pledge of support and of the community's pledge of obedience. Here was the rule and the promise that God would reward those loyal to the rule. That covenant was seen as controlling Jewish life and destiny. So important was the promise that it was sealed in blood and imprinted onto the flesh of every male Israelite. At the circumcision the eight-day old boy was welcomed into the covenant of Abraham our father.

The covenant required many duties and promised many rewards. Here are the six hundred and thirteen commandments and all the happy symbols of redemption: the holy land, rain in its season, progeny, security for the nation, but the covenant was a living relationship not a text. It symbolized the fact that the Jew lived in a coherent world where the gods were not capricious and where God can be depended on. Here is the sanity religion provides. Here is the command you can fulfill. Here is the context which encourages spiritual and moral growth. Here is the commitment that there is reason to hope.

Covenant thinking colors all Jewish thought. It is Israel's charter, but it is also Israel's promise of salvation, "If you are willing and obedient you shall enjoy the good things of the earth." The covenant relationship was conceived as having been given by God in his grace, Israel had not merited it; and God would be long suffering - patient - as long as the people tried to meet its terms; but, if Israel should prove contumacious, deliberately disloyal, the relationship could be ended. Israel remains a chosen people as long as it remains a choosing people.

Why was Israel chosen? At first no one really asked 'why'; they simply accepted gratefully. Later it was suggested that Israel was chosen precisely because she was the least significant of the nations. If God could take the least likely and raise them on high, what could He not accomplish

No religious vision is worthwhile if it does not lift us out of laziness and compromise. Some years ago Joshua Loth Liebman wrote a perceptive little book in which he described the psychic encouragement which a vital faith can provide. Peace of Mind became a best-seller because it presented the calming benefits of faith to a world settling down after the dislocations of a world war. I remember thinking at the time that the sense of well-being which comes from feeling in tune with the universe is only one side of religion's benefit. A serious religious tradition must unsettle complacency and challenge moral lethargy. There are always some who look on their religious participation as a talisman, "I'm taking no chance"; but the tradition left no one in doubt that the covenant involved extra duties rather than special favors. Strictness was the order of the day. "You specially have I known among the peoples of the earth, therefore will I visit upon you all your iniquities" (Amos 3:2). The covenant is not a list of privileges but of do's and don'ts.

The covenant relationship seems a bit too cozy / as if no one cered about the other nations. There was a covenant for Israel and one for all mankind; indeed, the covenant with Noah, the universal covenant, preceded Israel's. Its rules were more general, but the sense of duty and promise were no less real. The prophetic books include oracles denouncing various nations for sins committed against the terms of the Noahite covenant. God cares how all nations act.

There was a protest. This has the smell of a private club.

Not at all. The privilege of belonging to the covenant people is open to all. For all their wonderful philosophy Athens never outgrew the feeling that all non-Athenians were barbarians, lesser breeds without the law. Our tradition went the other way. God is not mine but everyone's. Heaven is not reserved for my family but open to any and all who are deserving. God's Instructions are to be shared and the promise at the End of Days is for all peoples.

I thought that Jews didn't seek converts.

We did when we could. The New Testament describes Jews who crossed and recrossed the Mediterranean for that purpose until a series of devastating military defeats, in the first and second centuries when the Jews of Palestine rebelled against Rome and were disastrously beaten, and particularly until Christianity became the official church of the Roman Empire, when it became imprudent and potentially suicidal even to suggest conversion.

But there are no Jewish missionaries.

Every city has classes for those who come to a rabbi and say: we've found our way to you and are interested. Every year I convert several dozen who called and came in.

Why are we accused of being clannish?

Because we are not willing to make ourselves over in their image. Some months ago, on a plane, I found myself seated next to a priest. We found shared interests and the time passed pleasantly, if a bit competitively. His seminary courses in doctrine had taught him to put down the Chosen People idea as chauvinist. "You have many accomplishments but you set yourselves apart." He had renounced marriage and family to become a priest. My turn: "Does not any serious commitment require a moving away from ordinariness?" His: "Your loyalty to each other precludes larger social concerns." I reminded him that at ordination he had bent and kissed the ring of his bishop, promising total obedience, yet, he felt able to serve all.

Substitute close ties for clannish and one of Judaism's most attractive features is suggested. Families should support each other in times of crisis. I find it only natural that when Jews in the Soviet Union or Latin America are in trouble they can turn to us. In a cruel world I do not want to feel bereft and alone and I was puzzled when Christians turned a cold shoulder to the suffering of fellow Christians in Lebanon and the Sudan.

Protest came from another direction.

It's the rules not the choice that bothers me. I want to be free.

I don't want to have my creativity stifled or my spirit reined in. Rules are set down to control others.

There are rules and rules. A Fascist state has rules; and so does a free society. Arthur Rubinstein practiced four hours each day of his life. Did his practice of the piano's mechanics inhibit his ability to imprint his feeling on the music? I can't make up my mind, at least not intelligently, until I've researched an issue. Spontaneity can grace life only after discipline and preparation have raised our talents and sensitized our souls to the point where we can let go gracefully and creatively. There is a world of difference between 'being creative' and 'letting it all hang out.'

You're right. A friend faced a writing block and resorted to drugs to finish his novel. By his own admission he produced trash. The novel was not finished until he sweated out his frustration while working at his typewriter.

Freedom is the original virtue. God signs Himself: "I am the Lord, Your God, Who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage." In early Biblical days a colorful ritual enhanced the imperative of freedom. A slave who preferred the shabby security of remaining another's responsibility to the challenge of freedom had his ear pierced as a sign that his ear was somehow defective since he had not heard God proclaim the law of release. Yet, our tradition always paired freedom and law. The slaves were a cantankerous rabble who would have returned to Egypt had not Moses, with great difficulty, brought them to Sinai where they bound themselves to the covenant and found a covenanted purpose. Freedom is not having endless free options, but knowing how to use the options available to you.

But law is arbitrary. God announced the law and Israel simply accepted.

True. Particpetory democracy was not yet an idea whose time had come. But remember Sinai is not a symbol for any law, only God's law. God is not a fallible and limited mortal but God, constrained by His nature to be wise and farseeing. It was inconceivable that He should announce any but

a just and necessary rule and it remains inconceivable that the Law should be refined with any other standard in mind.

Society requires law and Judaism understands God's law as a sanctifying and ennobling discipline. Sensitivity to the oppressed is imprinted in nearly every chapter of Torah law. We are not to deny justice to the powerless or favor in court the well-placed or mock the strange dress or manner of aliens. Why? "For you were once outcasts in the land of Egypt." Frequent experience as victim has left us particularly sensitive to human hurt, the consequences of which you see in the remarkable role which the Jew, though generally the most recent citizen of a state has played in recent reformist and humanitarian movements. When we were finally let in you would have thought we would have gorged ourselves after centures of deprivation. A few among us were gluttons but not many. The proportion of well-off Jews active in liberal causes and voting for liberal candidates has often been noticed with surprise.

Centuries as a victim taught us empathy, but it was God Who taught us the specifics of what we must do, and He did so not simply in detailed commandments, but by making us sense His nature. A sage pondered the line in Deuteronomy which read: "You shall walk after the Lord your God." (3:5) God is not a person. How can we follow pure spirit? The meaning is to walk in the ways of God. As He clothes the naked, so you must do. Similarly, as He visits the sick and comforts mourners. It was inconceivable that His rules be anything but right and necessary; and the folk knew a God who studied His own Torah, arranged narratives, cared for the indigent and took care of all His children. Theoretically, all interpretation of the law had to be made in that spirit. The tradition is full of illustrative stories. A rabbi's wife accused her servant girl of breaking a bowl and demanded that the girl make good the cost out of her wages. The girl denied the act and the woman took the girl before the community religious court. The rabbi said he would accompany his wife. She demurred. I don't need you. I know that, but I am coming on behalf of the servant girl who does not know the court's

methods and has no one else to defend her.

But there are rules I don't agree with in the Torah. For instance, the stipulation of death as punishment for certain crimes. I don't believe in capital punishment.

Neither did many rabbis. Torah is the written text and an oral tradition, that which we now call Talmud,was what Israel understood the contracts to mean. Capital punishment was understood as a practice to be followed only in the most extreme situation. In most cases application was so limited by due process qualifications that it became almost impossible to condemn a criminal to death. Was God's original statement of the law unjust? Not at all. The law needed to be understood in the spirit in which it was intended and what else could God have intended but that life be reverenced?

When Israel stood at Sinai the Torah reports that they acclaimed the covenant in a surprising way: "We will obey and we will listen." Agreement preceded knowledge of its terms. The myth suggests that the actual words spoken that day were recognized as a beginning. The covenant was a document of responsibility whose full implication would emerge over time as we struggle to understand; and so it has been. The question never has been do Jews literally fulfill the original terms but are we heirs to its spirit?

For a long portion of their formative years the Hebrew were slaves and memory of that brutality has not been forgotten; indeed, it is deliberately recreated each Passover season when we are made to say: "We were slaves to Pharoah in Egypt." Knowing what it means to be beaten and degraded we have a special obligation to help restore others to their freedom and to treat others with dignity. Heine, I think it was, who said, "Freedom speaks with a Hebrew accent." Judaism has not made its peace with any coercive systems. The hope of freedom seems to have penetrated only to those parts of the globe reached by the commanding voice of God: "Let My people go." Czarist Russia held the Jew at arm's length because our presence suggested the illegitimacy of Czarist autocracy. Hitler's pathological hate of the Jew

existed in part because our very existence suggested a way of life which would not subordinate judgment to a feuhrer's decisions. But Heine saw only one-half of the equation: freedom speaks with a Hebrew accent and so do just laws. The ex-slaves were a cantankerous rabble until they accepted the covenant. Love can thrive only when two people are careful of their responsibilities to each other. Art emerges only when the artist has mastered his materials. Law permits freedom.

The bell rang. We've covered a lot of territory. Someone asked me to pull together what I had said so they can think about it.

The outside world may not let you in and your psyche may not let you out, so why not see what a whole-hearted identification can let you become. We cannot jump out of our skins. There is a sense in which being born a Jew, or a Christian or a Buddhist, forever colors our lives. Psychologists will tell you that one of the most important keys to mental health is to accept what you are, your genetic endowment, gender, looks, bundle of talents. "Like yourself." Ultimately, the best reason to "become" a Jew is that you have the chance to and that generations can testify to the value of the experience. Since we cannot shed our soul, we would be foolish to squander the opportunity to appropriate for ourselves a noble and engaging inheritance - to give up being chosen.

Chapter 4

WHY KEEP AT IT?

My neighborhood was heavily Jewish and I was in high school before it hit home that not everybody was Jewish. I still remember my surprise when I recognized that there are only sixteen million Jews among the four billion earthlings. In the laboratory there is such a thing as a critical mass. A chemical can be in such minute quantities that it can no longer catalyse a reaction. Aren't we Jews at or below that point? And if we can't contribute to civilization, why keep at it?

It was not always so. Jews never possessed overwhelming numbers, but we have not always been a tiny minority. Before the bloody and futile revolts against Rome in the first and second centuries, you've heard of Masada, Jews may have comprised ten percent of the population of the Eastern Roman world. In medieval Europe we represented perhaps two percent of the population, but a much higher proportion of the urban communities where the future was about to unfold. It is in recent generations that we have not kept pace with the population explosion. Analysts offer several reasons, the most tragic of which is the Holocaust. Then, too, Zero Population Growth appealed precisely to middle-class urban folk like us, and many of the future mothers of Israel were eager for careers.

Our numbers are significant only in the United States and Israel, so we console ourselves that quality, not quantity, counts; here, incidentally, lies the source of our interest in Jews who have made important artistic and scientific contributions.

A Jew must worry about numbers. One of our better theologians, Emil Fackenheim has written a good deal about what he has called a new commandment; specifically, do not allow Hitler a posthumous victory. The Nazis meant to annihilate the Jewish people and almost succeeded. Our response must be to preserve and enliven, and that response, according to Fackenheim,

mandates not only support of the State of Israel, but children.

I don't know any Jew committed to a one-child marriage or a career without marriage who will change his or her mind to spite Hitler.

There was silence for awhile. We had come to one of those commitment issues which are too personal, really, to be talked about. After a minute or so someone asked why so few Jews realize how few we are.

We are members of an upwardly mobile, achievement-oriented group, many of whose members tend to be extremely visible. Practically every day the seven o'clock news includes a report on the Arab-Israel conflict. Because of our civic energies and concentration in certain urban areas, candidates for major office seek our vote. Jewish names appear routinely in scientific and business articles as well as in public life. We were not hired by the old-line businesses or allowed to move easily into the corridors of power, so we gambled our efforts and brains in high risk activities, and when the world changed there we were.

But there were other groups on the outside who did not advance as rapidly as we.

We can thank the Torah tradition. Study was a mandated act of devotion, "and you shall teach them [the commandments] to your children." Judaism was one of the few religions which declared literacy a prerequisite for the religious life. By the second century of this era Jews had developed a compulsory education policy - at least for males. In medieval Europe a man proved he was a priest by showing he could read; this at a time when literacy was almost universal among Jews. "We are the only people, the only European people, who have survived from antiquity pretty much intact. That means we kept our identity, and it means we are the only people who have never known analphebitism. We were always literate because you cannot be a Jew without being literate. The women were less literate than the men but even they were much more literate than their counterparts elsewhere. Not only the elite knew how to read but every Jew had to read - the whole people,

in all its classes and on all levels of giftedness and intelligence" (Hannah Arendt). When the market place required human beings who could read and cipher and not simply muscles and stamina to do manual labor, we were ready.

Another reason many Jews do not realize how few we are is that the Jew looms large in the unconscious of the western world. Non-Jews regularly exaggerate our numbers. The Christian Church was founded within and in opposition to the early synagogue, and throughout its history most theological deviations have been seen as Judaizing heresies, a term which covered a multitude of ideas, most common of which was the teaching that man is saved by a life of good works rather than a profession of faith. What was true of the Church was equally true of the mosque. Mohammed expected to convert the Jews of Arabia and when he failed he turned bitterly against them and destroyed the Jewish communities in the Hejaz. Both the New Testament and the Koran curse the Jews of the day for not accepting the new apostle of God.

The medieval Christian feared that any act of acceptance or kindness towards Jews would incur God's wrath for he had been taught that we are cursed by God as deicides and condemned by Him to wander the earth as outcasts. The images of anti-semitism are well-known: the mark of Cain, Shylock, poisoner of the Host, ritual murderer, Christ-killer. We were set apart, made to wear special clothes and to live within ghetto walls. We were subversive of religion because we held to another; patently inferior, yet somehow, compelling and threatening. We were few, but as the enemy we were dangerous to the faith and the faithful; and as the enemy we became in people's minds a powerful force.

Modern secularity did not end either prejudice or the labeling of the Jew as enemy. Secular myths simply replaced the older religious ones. If we were no longer the anti-Christs, we were a mongrel race, genetically inferior. We were a diseased lot, infected with the bacillus of subversive

ideas; like Typhoid Mary we spread disunity and diseased ideas wherever we went. After the assassination of the Czar in 1880, Russia set out to eliminate the Jewish community. Our crime? We carried the virus of democratic change. Many see us as the masterminds of a powerful conspiracy against whatever institutions they held sacred: theChurch; white supremacy; the working class; the Third World; Western values.

Some years ago an Australian Catholic, Freidrich Heer, wrote an important study of anti-semitism called God's First Love. After its publication he received many letters, most of which struck this note:

> 'Filled with dismay by your article about the Jews - and with satisfaction at the indignation it has everywhere aroused - I am writing to you to force the peoples of the earth even more under Jewish domination, and even to press the church into its service.' 'Who are you, sir, that you cannot acknowledge what is acknowledged by millions of right-thinking people everywhere? And this you call, in defiance of all the facts, "the cancer of Christianity"! Sir, what are you? Perhaps you are yourself a Jew or part Jewish, so that with typical Jewish blindness to your own failings you profess not to recognize this "infamy"? Or have you been bribed with Jewish money to work, against all ideas of right and justice, for the subjugation of all peoples under the Jewish yoke?' 'We have no wish to wipe out the distinctions which God in His wisdom made between the various peoples, nor to tolerate amongst us parasitic agitators such as the Jews have in fact always been. God has not only asked us, He has commanded us, to fight against wrong. And that is why we ask Christ, our beloved immortal king, to deliver us from our and His enemies and to destroy all efforts to betray us forever to our murderers.'

Whenever privilege was challenged by a group demanding their rightful opportunity, the champions of privilege discovered a Jewish conspiracy. Whenever nationalism emerged as a controlling notion, the Jew was branded as

a cosmopolitan, "fundamentally incapable of understanding the German soul," (Heinrich Paulus) which translated to mean that the Torah's lifting up of the concept of humanity ran counter to the romantic notions about the superiority of the Aryan race. Whenever Marxism raised the banner of revolution against entrenched institutional power the Jew was branded as a commercial creature of bourgeois mentality whose religious ideas dulled men's perception of the necessity of revolutionary remedies. Whenever the masses were impoverished they blamed the Jews. Over the centuries laws prohibiting the Jews to own land and the exclusion of Jews from the Christian trade guilds forced our fathers into peddling and money-lending, and the rich who regularly milked the Jews of profit of their enterprise found it convenient to focus anger on the pariahs rather than on those who truly benefited from the system, namely, themselves.

You're right. I've had a roommate tell me how many Jews there are in the United States Senate who have never wondered how many Baptists or un-churched sit in that body; and he included in his list a few unsuspecting gentiles.

One reason to keep at it is that we remind the world of ideas and values it would rather forget. A Jew brought with him an understanding of the Bible which gave the lie to all the concordants between church and state which sanctified class and clerical privilege. The Bible was a cross the imperial church had to bear. Except for the so-called proof passages which presumedly foretold the coming of Christ, they did not want the masses discovering and rallying round an Amos or Isaiah's condemnation of all who abused power; Paul had made it easy for the power elite to legitimatize their roles when he prescribed a high wall of separation between spiritual interests and govern-ment; "Render unto Caesar the things that belong to Caesar and to God the things that belong to God;" so the medieval church actually locked up what it called the Old Testament lest the faithful read and "misunderstand."

As a political outcast the Jew found his political interests naturally

allied with the rebels, revolutionaries and reformers who sought a larger justice. As a believer whose religion began with the miracle of the Exodus, the Jew worshipped a freedom loving God Who had declared that part of a believer's duty was "to proclaim freedom throughout the land." The social revolutionaries of the eighteenth and nineteenth century drew much of their inspiration precisely from such texts and, by citing the prophetic vision of an earthly Jerusalem, a here and now goal, which would be achieved through the overhaul of all existing political and economic structures, challenged Christianity's supernaturalism, its promise of pie in the sky, if everyone patiently accepted malnutrition and subjugation in this life. The Jewish messianic hope included Heavenly rewards but never let go of the possibility of establishing Jerusalem as a model city. The imperial church had locked the Bible away, but the Jew kept these texts alive, and when Christians finally read the Old Testament they came across ideas of community, justice and righteousness in tune with their new expectations. Old privileges were in fact not sanctioned by God as those who enjoyed those privileges had claimed all along. Unrest among those who defended the old order blamed the Jew for the Bible and its uncomfortable ideas and sought to keep him quarantined lest he spread his spiritual infection.

The Jew was never seen as he was. There are flattering interpretations of our role in history as well as prejudiced ones. The French essayist, Jacque Maritan, described Judaism as "like an activating leaven injected into the mass" whose role is to teach the world "to be discontented and restless as long as the world has not God." The drama of the individual struggling against repression and tyranny in the Soviet Union focuses on the Jew. The survival of the State of Israel has come to symbolize the struggle of democracy to maintain itself in a world of medieval prejudice and oily power. In a world full of refugees there are few Jewish refugees and, if Jews can help it, none stay so permanently. When a Russian Jew arrives in Israel he is given a job and a key to a flat before he leaves the airport. When he arrives in

Cleveland he is given a job and an apartment. Neither the Holocaust nor Arab wars have broken this people's incredible will to survive in dignity; proof to ourselves and the world of the potential of the human spirit. In a world which is increasingly statist, the Jew represents the challenge of individualism, freedom of conscience, thoughtful perception and a higher purpose. Such a view is flattering but it must be recognized that it is a symbolic role which is affirmed. The Jew is not seen as he is, but treated mythically and invested with powers which he does not possess.

Around the dinner table I often hear my parents discuss whether this or that famous author or movie star or politician is a Jew. We share this sense of Jewish importance. They often refer to "Jewish power" in Washington.

Would that there was such a force. In the nineteen-thirties, when the Jews were the boat people, nothing Jews said or did substantially changed our government's restrictive quotas on immigration. A university may have a sizeable Jewish enrollment, but the administration will not give a second thpught about setting registration on Rosh Hashanah or Yom Kippur. Would our government sell sophisticated weapons to the Rejectionist Front States, Jordan, Iraq, and Syria, if Jewish power were all it's puffed up to be?

Where, then, did we get such ideas?

In part from non-Jewish conspiracy theories. In part from the observable fact that our impact on history has been far beyond what, given our numbers, might have been expected. In part from the biblical doctrine of election, the belief that God chose Israel for a purpose and that we serve God's purpose by obeying the Torah. "You are my witnesses, says the Lord." By our witness others are led to appreciate the way which is Torah.

Unroll a Torah scroll to the sixth chapter of Deuteronomy to the famous line which is Judaism's profession of faith - "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God. The Lord is one;" and you will note, even if you cannot read Hebrew, that the last letters of the first and last words are written double-sized. These letters, <u>ayin</u> - <u>daled</u> - form the Hebrew noun <u>ed</u> which means witness.

The ancient scribal tradition lifts up the idea that when we recite the Shema we witness to our faith in God and the Torah. A German philosopher of the last generation, Hermann Cohen, put the witness idea this way: Jews offer God their presence in the world, a presence which proclaims God's sovereignty and casts suspicion on all purely human, political and ideological certainties. We stand for the worship of the gracious and merciful unseen God against all idolatries.

Since Sinai the Jewish people have felt committed to a special mission. The mission theme was articulated during the Babylonian Exile when Deutero-Isaiah heard God say that a time would soon be at hand when the exiles would return to Judea and, having acknowledged the power of God, would live there as a compelling example to the rest of the world, "a light unto the nations." He spoke of a Judea reborn, organized according to Torah law, providing not only a security to its citizens but a compelling vision to the world. Jerusalem would by its existence and example suggest to other nations the virtue of justice and Torah. "For out of Zion shall go forth the law and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem." Modern political Zionism is an outgrowth of this vision. Zionism is not simply a program for a place to which displaced Jews come, but a vision of a just and enlightened community where the values of the Torah tradition are realized in daily practice. The motto of the first pioneers was the Biblical phrase, "Zion shall be built in justice."

Deutero-Isaiah's vision was unique for its time. The spread of religion by conquest and the sword, common in pagan religions, gives way here to the theme of conversion through the compelling force of example. Here is a vision of a God who is concerned not only with His own but with the future of all peoples.

The Jews returned to Zion and, for the better part of a millenium, maintained their state until Rome destroyed the Temple (70 C.E.) and the people were again dispersed. When Deutero-Isaiah's mission imagery had to be moth-balled until a Jewish State would be reestablished, a new mission myth emerged

which centered on the power of Jewish worship. In its Kabbalistic formulation, and Kabbalah preoccupied the Jewish mind during the Middle Ages, it was taught that an accident had taken place at Creation, part of God's being had become trapped in the cosmos, caught up in material shells. Only the prayers of Israel, particularly the prayers of the holy and learned in Israel, could break open those shells, release the imprisoned light, allow God's being to become whole, and to gain the power to establish the messianic era. A wounded world could not be healed without the faithful devotion of Jews.

That's incredible.

All myths are to outsiders; but recognize it for what it was, an attempt to explain the incongruities of our experience, why God does not send the messiah to a beleaguered, persecuted and faithful people, and why Israel should keep at it. Because we had a mission we were not what we seemed to be, a small and impotent people, flotsam tossed about by the cruel seas, but the people whose existence was critical to history. Without our devotion mankind had no future. The mission idea kept our people morally sensitive and relatively sane.

In recent times the mission idea was reshaped to conform to the contemporary spirit of activism. The original idea had been if Jews would take themselves in hand and maintain Zion in justice, God would be pleased and order up the Messianic Age. Now pulpits transformed the mission idea into a morally bracing sermon which suggested that it is the duty of the Jew, as heir of Amos, to serve energeticelly the cause of social and economic justice. Wherever he lived the Jew would be the feshioner of the breve new world.

The Torah commanded, 'love your neighbor as yourself.' The prophets commanded, 'righteousness, righteousness shelt thou pursue.' Political history with its persecutions as well as the tradition sensitized the Jew to injustice. Your grandparents knew what it was to be without rights and denied opportunity. They were boat people. How else did they come to Ellis Island? In the United States the highest percent of voters among religious groups is to be found

among Jews, and they cast their ballots predominantly for liberal causes. Our fund-raising efforts on behalf of refugees and need are legendary. Social work has been a largely Jewish profession. Whether they worked for the rights of factory workers, farm workers or racial minorities, Jews sensed that they were acting as their religion encouraged. Had not the sages chosen the fifty-eighth chapter of Isaiah as a synagogue reading for the holiest day of the religious year, Yom Kippur? "This is the fast that I desire: to unlock the fetters of wickedness and untie the cords of lawlessness, to let the oppressed go free; to break every yoke. It is to share your bread with the hungry, and to take the wretched into your home; when you see the naked to clothe him, and not to ignore your own kin."

Didn't they recognize that as a minority of outsiders they couldn't transform the world?

The old order was passing, the apostles of the new order often quoted Scripture and Jews were accustomed to think of themselves as consequential. It was a time when Jews were terribly conscious of our 'contributions to civilization.' The conventional wisdom had it that civilization, then defined by the culture of the West, grew from two sources: the religion of Israel and the philosophy of Greece. Primacy in learning was given to Aristotle, primacy in moral passion was given to Amos. Jews had given to the world the concept of the one God, the Ten Commandments, the hope of immortality and the concept of humanity. "have we not all one father? Has not one God created us all?" They had provided the prophets whose uncompromising commitment to justice sparked the current reform. Jews had a leading role in shaping the modern ethos, Mahler, Freud, Einstein; and in the reform of the old order, Lassalle, Marx, Brandeis. So many Jews were among the pioneers of nuclear physics that the Nazis mocked it as Judenphysik until they found out its importance. I've often thought that the Allies won the Second World War because Germany lost so much time finding Aryan replacements for the Jewish scientists.

But many of these were Jews in name only. Marx hated his ancestry. I

remember being shocked at his diatribe, A World Without Jews.

Marx lived much of his life in a London filled with poor Jews. Nothing in his writings shows that this man, whose soul was outraged at the institutions which created urban poverty, ever saw or cared about the Jewish poor who lived on his doorstep. Why Marx was prejudiced against his ancestors I leave to biographers with the suggestion that the world's tendency to dismiss unwanted ideas as Jewish places a heavy burden on Jews who want to be heard. For our purpose, since the imprint of our environment is indelible, the intellectual and social concerns Marx evidenced were in some measure a refraction of the religious world of his fathers.

I am allergic to excessive rhetoric. Is it really clear that there would be no one to light the way if Jews were not around? Twenty-five centuries ago only Israel insisted on human worth and human equality. Today, thank God, there are other sensitive and concerned groups who encourage their followers to reach beyond self-serving political philosophies and familiar social attitudes so as to reform the old order. There is the courageous work of the Mother Theresas who work in the slums of the world. There are the experiments in social democracy of the Scandinavian countries and the volunteers of the Peace Corps and Vista. There is the non-violent gospel of racial justice cherished by the disciples of Martin Luther King.

The value of Jewish survival can be discussed in at least two non-mythic ways: the actual rather than the mythic consequences for the world which result from our continued existence as Jews, a measure of some consequence but one that cannot be taken accurately; and the consequence for Jews which results from our being shaped by the Jewish tradition. This latter point is for me the critical one.

I hold that Israel's primary responsibility has been and is to cultivate dignity and justice within Israel. Those who cannot take themselves in hand are not equipped to be the saviors of the world. The far mystery, the actual way in which Israel's survival is significant, I leave to God. Our sages used

to say, "The miracle is not always recognized by the one who is its agent," which I take to mean that our existence as a people has importance, but that God is not about to tell us precisely how we are important. Our sages also said: "Sanctify yourself before you seek to sanctify others." The traditional messianic vision has it that in the end of days the many will flock to the mountain of the Lord. Why will they come to Zion? Because those who live there will have built their lives around Torah values. The story was often told of a young rabbi who set out confidently to save the world. Repeated disappointments taught him that this task was beyond his capacity, so he reduced his expectations. He would kindle the fires of faith in his congregation. Despite his best efforts many remained unresponsive. Again, he lowered his sights. He would raise his family in piety, but each home has its prodigal. At the end of a long and industrious life the rabbi realized that the one accomplishment he could guarantee was the cultivation of his own soul. The hope that our efforts are consequential encourages us to do more, but we cannot be certain. We do what must be done.

I have been fortunate in my profession and family and there are times when I say to myself, 'take it easy! Others can see that integration occurs peacefully or that a decent welfare program is enacted;' but when the Sabbath comes, and it arrives each week, and the Haftarah is from Amos of Isaiah, I know that I cannot be one of those who are at ease in Zion. I hold that the value of Jewish survival is best established in terms of the growth, sensitivity and maturity which the Torah tradition makes available to those who opt for the Jewish way of life. There is, or can be, a formative tension between traditional ideas, familiar institutions and the "I" as we reach for a vision which helps us make sense out of life and a way which affords grace and growth.

The problem with the modern mission stance is that it emphasized a reformist crusade but not the reforming pieties which alone can provide an environment in which the Jew can grow, not only in knowledge but in understanding, not only in independence of spirit but in social responsibility,

not only in awareness but in holiness. You will not find in our literature the image of Don Quixote setting out to overthrow all the evil of the world with a broken lance, a garrulous friend, and a swaybacked horse. For all our knowledge our world has not been particularly successful in providing an environment in which children can grow up into balanced, wholesome and sensitive adults. The education of the whole man has been neglected for the education of the technician, the soldier, the faithful comrade, the patriot. The home has been reduced to an economic unit, and many parents off-handedly relegate to others many of the responsibilities of training and guidance. Much in our environment encourages us to compete, to mistake possession for happiness, to accept the inevitability of war, to pass by an injured person lest we be sued.

The Torah tradition refracts other values: a way of life which insists and emphasizes that the soul of each child is precious and that our purpose is to serve God, not the machine, the party or the state. Our classic texts are biographical and humane rather than scientific and technical. Our classic achievements are a sensitive home, a truth-seeking school, and a synagogue searching for God. Our religion is a sanctified way of life, a culture which sets as its goal the disciplined man, fully informed, spiritually independent, but socially conscious and morally bound to the commandments of God. Such a culture, if it is seriously pursued, justifies its existence.

Rabbi, those are big, vague words, and I'm not sure that they're not just words. When I looked at the Torah I found some things I agreed with and many I did not. I once picked up a Talmud and skimmed a page or two. It seemed to deal with the minutia of ritual and with such non-religious matters as torts and contracts. Where do you find such hi-falutin' ideas in such pedestrian stuff?

Torah and Talmud exist on two levels. In themselves, as books on my shelf, they are documents of a particular time and place, classics if you will, which, like all such works, are written in archaic fashion and describe

an environment which is no longer ours. To read a translation of either anthology is to find oneself reading material, some of which is familiar and some passing strange, alternately stirring and boring. There are all those 'begats' at the beginning of Genesis and a complex discussion of the precise time for the recitation of the Shema fills the opening chapter of the Talmud which, to quote one student, tells me more about that arcane subject than I care to know.

Torah and Talmud are books and they are also beginnings. The reading and interpretation of the Torah was and is the central act of devotion in the synagogue. The reading and interpretation of Talmud was and is the central act of devotion in the yeshivah. On the one hand both anthologies are archaic documents full of rules we have outgrown or find unacceptable, and on the other the power of their transforming themes is such that each generation has read with benefit and sensed a vision splendid. We no longer burn witches; indeed, it is doubtful if Israel ever did; but the Bible's attack on magic, necromancy, whispering charms over wounds, and like superstitions remains a challenge to our Age of Aquarius. Our lives are governed by the common law rather than rabbinic norms, but the fundamental principles of the Talmudic system challenge many common juridic practices. Reports on torture as a means of criminal investigation are rare in Jewish records and police brutality almost unheard of. The reason is simple. Under Talmudic law a man cannot be forced to testify against himself, and even voluntary self-incrimination is not accepted as evidence.

Out of the Torah emerge themes which affirm the unity of God, and dignity of man, the imperative of community and a political vision based on freedom, justice and law. The prophets set out boldly the imperative of a classless society and a non-repressive social order. No one is above the law - king or commoner. That there are texts we can no longer accept literally in no way mitigates their formative power or suggests that we have even now discovered their full import. The transforming and vivifying power of the

Torah's Instructions remains just that - one of the mysteries on which our faith rests.

Ancients sanctified the moments spent at the shrine. Jews were encouraged to sanctify every moment of their lives. The structure of his community, the way he conducted business, the way food was prepared and eaten, the relationship of husband and wife, all were divinely mandated and spiritually significant. "In all your ways acknowledge Him." There was a blessing for every occasion, and this multiplication of pious expressions was not a way to gain merit but a signal that a standard of holiness should be involved in all that we do. Marriage was not simply a sexual arrangement or an arrangement of property, but kiddushim, a sanctification of two lives. Farming was not sowing and harvesting but careful stewardship of God's creation. We think of the marketplace as a jungle where the only rules are to survive, make a profit and not get caught. Business was not making out but the honorable management of production and distribution conducted according to Torah standards, 'just weights, just measures.' God's standards applied to commerce, politics, marriage, indeed to all of life. That's why the Talmud deals with commercial matters. Neither Torah nor Talmud gave any occasion to argue that business or politics were governed by a different set of rules than one's home or religious life.

There is a rule in Deuteronomy that cities of refuge are to be designated in the Promised Land where one guilty of unpremeditated murder could flee and escape revenge. The rule seems quaint and some historians doubt that such cities actually were established; but the idea suggests a central element in the Torah's concern for justice. In those years there were no city police force or federal judiciary. If a man was murdered his kinsmen organized a posse and sought revenge. There was a certain crude justice in all this, but not all murders are alike. Some murders are premeditated, others are accidental, while others are committed under mitigating circumstances. Probably the only way available to distinguish degrees of culpability was to create these refuge cities to which a man could flee until

some court or sheik took over from the posse. Whether such cities actually existed is not as important as the fact that this rule did, and its existence focused judicial concern on due process, change of venue and a fair trial, worthy concerns indeed, and ones which were fully and sensitively developed in rabbinic thought because it was clear that God wished them to be.

The Torah mandates a shrine-based sacrificial cult. Few of us would want to take part in such worship. Maimonides didn't either and carefully explained that God had authorized sacrifices because it was the form of worship familiar throughout the ancient Near East. "Man by his nature is not capable of abandoning suddenly all to which he was accustomed." Even God makes haste slowly. The Israelite shrine was a typical West Asian building where familiar devotional rites, libations, incense burning, prostration, took place; but there were differences. In every other shrine there was an inner room where the cult's images were kept. In the Temple there was an inner room, the Holy of Holies, where nothing was kept. It was an imageless space, designed to remind people that God is spirit, not form, here, yet everywhere.

Leviticus is full of shrine regulations, but the prophetic books insisted that religion dealt with more than the shrine. "Who has asked this of you to trample my courts? Bring no man vain oblations. . ." It is essential Judaism that our responsibilities to others take precedence over our responsibilities to God. On the Day of Atonement we must first make our peace with those whom we have wronged or maligned before we can confidently ask God for forgiveness. Two of the six divisions of the Talmud deal with the Temple and its cult. These were seldom studied in the yeshivot, just as most of us skim the priestly rules of Leviticus. They were not entirely omitted because they were the platform from which all later ritual developed, the psalms were the hymns of the Temple; but they were not given the weight accorded sections dealing with damages or the holidays where practice remained closer to the original texts.

Originally, there were many Israelite shrines, some of which, like the sanctuary at Arad, have been excavated. Then all worship was centered in

the shrine King Solomon built in Jerusalem.

Dispersion led Jews to create meeting houses in their various settlements where they conducted public business and recited the songs and liturgy of the central shrine. With the destruction of the Temple, the synagogue became a sanctuary and a new religious institution emerged. The Temple had been hierarchal. In the synagogue anyone could lead worship. Architecture was important to the Temple whose dimensions were said to represent the proportions of the cosmos. The synagogue was simply a room. The Temple had to be in Jerusalem on Mt. Zion. Synagogues could be any place. Since Torah reading and the psalms were central parts of the worship, the Jew was constantly reminded of his tradition's teachings. Facing Jerusalem during his worship, he was reminded of his messianic hopes. Just as the Torah was the first Scripture to be treated as an open book and not the monopoly of priests, so the synagogue was the first democratic sanctuary where anyone might teach or preach and no one did your religion for you.

O.K. I accept the idea that the Biblical and Talmudic spirit were transforming ones and that they inspired a long-lived and vital tradition, but today these ideas are common property. The Christians claim the Bible for themselves. The Koran includes Biblical themes. The common law protects the individual as much as Talmudic law. Isn't the work of a separate Jewish community over and done?

Torah civilization has never ceased creating new and stimulating forms, nor have other traditions ceased borrowing our ideas. The mosque and many forms of the Protestant Church flattered the synagogue by patterning themselves on its open and democratic structure. Rabbinic Judaism mandated universal literacy and created the West's first community-wide educational structure - the great grand-daddy of our present public school systems. During the Middle Ages Jewish communities became miniature welfare states, replete with institutions which provided funds to bury the indigent dead, ransom captives, provide dowries for poor girls and daily support for poor

families; and many a nineteenth century reformer blueprinted his welfare state after the modes of what he saw in the ghetto. In Cleveland, as in many American cities, the concept of a combined charities campaign was borrowed by civic leaders impressed by the way local Jews organized to take care of their own. The progressive social movements of recent times drew on the language and imagery of the prophets and just as many of the Protestant leaders of the enlightenment had consulted Hebrew teachers to better understand the Bible, so many social reformers quoted the prophets. As soon as political emancipation allowed Jews to plunge into national issues they did so in proportion far beyond their numbers and long before they had enjoyed many of the advantages which now, for the first time, were available to them. Today, though it is harder to pinpoint the effect of corporate Jewish life on the world at large, the kibbutz movement has played a seminal role in man's experimentation with voluntaristic communitarian societies.

You're back to 'outside' talk.

Right, but it suggests creative capacity of the Torah tradition, that all that energy is spent and I find it hard to believe. As I've said I agree that the bottom line answer to 'why keep at it' is that there's no better religious vision around which to wrap your soul. My argument is simple: since you must, in any case, open your soul to a religious vision, why not to one of proven worth? Your great grandfather never asked the question. There were no options. The Torah tradition was his destiny and being a Jew taught him how to be human. You have options, or think you have. Deep down we feel ourselves unlabeled persons. If the Torah tradition is going to help shape your life you will have to make a deliberate choice to open yourself up to it. What I'm saying is simply: it's worth it.

Chapter 5

THE TREE AND THE RIVER

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

I'm confused. I hear talk about Jewish identity, Jewish values, a Jewish way of life and conflicting images come to mind: a youngster playing baseball with a yalmulke on his head; a bar mitzvah service in a congregation where almost everyone is bareheaded, a petition signed by a number of rabbis supporting a woman's right to have an abortion on demand, a rabbi as the keynote speaker at a Right-to-Life convention. At my bar mitzvah grandfather said, "Always be a good Jew." Now I'm not clear what he meant. Can there be different ways to jew?

Our grandfathers were two generations closer to old world ways and quite comfortsble with a Judaism that derived its religious and cultural values from the distant past, provided orientation and coherence in the present and let them face the future with a familiar hope. This old shoe understanding of the Torah tradition had provided dignity and survival for centuries, and those raised within this successfully functioning culture had no difficulty defining themselves or their religion. Your grandfather probably hoped you would be proud of your heritage, practice Judaism in the way he knew and be active in Jewish affairs.

Traditional observance still engeges many, but others would describe themselves as "good Jews" who are non-traditional in their observence. In the old world some Jews were pious, others indifferent; some learned and others simple; some fervent and some skeptical; but no one doubted that there was a definable Jewish way of life. If you had a question of practice you could look up the answer in one of the manuals like Joseph Karo's Shulhan Aruch (17c). There were differences, to be sure, oh minor points and variant customs, but for most purposes the text was inclusive and definitive. Today there are various forms of practice and philosophic approaches to Torah, each

loyally held. Orthodox and Conservative congregations celebrate most major holidays for two days; Reform observes only one day. Some Jews keep kosher but rarely attend worship. Others attend regularly but make no attempt to keep the dietary laws. There is a Jewish State pioneered by Jews, some of whom will not enter a synagogue of any kind. Either we read out all non-orthodox approaches as misguided and heretical or we accept the fact that our community is no longer of a mind and that there are significant reasons why various groups are reshaping their understanding of the Torah tradition.

I respect those who hold to the older view but I do not look at the Torah tradition in the same way they do. They claim that God intruded in history at a particular time and allowed Moses to mediate His, God's word, and that these are the only complete and final directions from God we have or will ever have, is a static idea inadequate to our time and, in fact, an inadequate description of the religious history of the Jewish people. There were prophets after Moses. The Talmudic sages were scholars, but many were also mystics who "saw" answers or "heard" a bat kol, a voice, tell them how to interpret Torah. The Torah tradition has been and is an evolving religious civilization, an outgrowth of the founding insights and of an unceasing exploration and redefinition of them. The Torah tradition is a process which continues to be affected by the founding words but has moved irreversibly beyond its original formulation.

How can Torah be the same, yet not the same?

You are thinking of Torah as a scroll. Think of Torah instead as a living tradition. Everything that is alive is in the process of change. The image of the adult as simply a larger version of the child, though it seems commonsensical, in fact, is not true. The child has immunities absent in the adult and the adult has a musculature and nervous system quite different from the child's. During puberty and adolescence, fundamental physical and emotional changes take place. The red-haired, blue-eyed infant grows into the brown-haired, brown-eyed, sexually active adult. The Torah tradition is

a living system so it is not surprising that the practice and presentation of Biblical times grew and changed into the rabbinic tradition and continues to grow and change even in our day.

Judaism is not a set of ideas and rules which have been known ever since Moses received a complete Torah from God; but a dynamic religion which has developed out of the original moment of meeting and out of the reflections and religious experiences of all those to whom that original meeting has remained significant. To make this point I tend to avoid the term Judaism which suggests a fixed set of ideas and practices constant over time and, incidentally is a term first applied to us by outsiders, and use instead the term, Torah tradition, which suggests a process of ongoing commentary on the founding themes. In its most specific designation Torah describes the scrolls of the Five Books of Moses, Genesis through Deuteronomy, which we keep in the ark; but Torah has broader meanings. Torah comprises all that came to be considered as revealed, the written as well as the oral law, and all serious commentary on that revelation. Many use Torah to signify all Jewish learning. Our people's special and mysterious word is the Torah and so is all that we have found that word to mean.

Etymologically, Torah derives from a Hebrew root which meant to shoot an arrow. It came to mean to instruct, hence, Torah is God's Instruction. Torah provides a structure for a living community as well as its informing ideas. The familiar Torah text expresses not only matters of theology such as monotheism but practical rules such as damages due if a farmer's ox gored his neighbor's cattle, thus, it provides a fabric of meaning as well as a fabric of communal norms and ethical considerations which are relevant to the living community.

The Torah is read each Sabbath in the synagogue following an annual cycle. Outsiders are sometimes puzzled that Jews make such a thing of an antique text; but the ritual is not purely formal. Each week the text is read and interpreted and I am repeatedly surprised at how appropriate much of the material is to my life and condition. Torah commentary, which is the

way the Torah tradition has evolved, continually draws new meaning out of the Word. When I am asked, do you believe in revelation, my answer rests on the mysterious power of the Torah text to remain insightful and challenging, and I am not afraid to call that abolutely unique capacity, no other ancient text has it, divine.

If one understands the Torah as I do, as a beginning rather that a summation, as a living and emerging process rather than as a religion fixed in Moses' time for all times, we have to face as honestly as we can your questions, what is authentic in the Jewish experience. Over the centuries there have been all kinds of changes in the people's understanding of Torah and many a struggle over each transformation. The Karaites who accepted only the authority of the written Torah charged the Talmudists with having added foreign material to Moses' law. Today the shoe is on the other foot and Talmudists charge liberal and conservative Jews with the same crime.

Though some who are orthodox find it difficult to credit, many who do not follow all the rules of the halacha feel themselves loyal and observant Jews. The more traditional-minded look at our history and see a fixed system handed down the generations by an unbroken chain of teachers.

Some years ago I was asked to write the article on "Heresy and Heretics" for the proposed Encyclopedia Judaica. A heretic is often a firm believer who simply does not control a majority of votes at the synod; so I wrote, "The heretic may be bitter or cynical or defiant, but he is not an apostate and often believes that he represents true Judaism." The proof I received contained this revised language. "The heretic may be distinguished from the apostate in that although he holds beliefs which are contrary to accepted doctrines, he does not renounce his religion entirely." My editor was not willing to face the possibility that the rabbinic formulation of Judaism was not the measure against which all professions of Torah must be gauged.

I look at the Jewish past and see constant change. Polygamy was an accepted form of family structure in Biblical times; monogamy is required in

Karo's text. The Temple was served by hereditary priests. In the synagogue priests have no significant authority. There was always change but the need for certainty is powerful and the rabbis did not have the mindset to call change by its right name.

There have been differences over time and sharply divergent attitudes among contemporaries. Biblical Jews enjoyed worship full of pageantry and centered on sacrifices. Two Biblical prophets, Hosea and Isaiah, condemned such ritual as misplaced duty: "Who has asked of you to trample my courts ?" The Pharisees affirmed the resurrection of the body, the Sadducees denied this teaching. Some Talmudic sages insisted that the messianic age will differ from our age only in that there will be an end to foreign domination over the Jewish State; others awaited a messianic age in which human nature and the social order would be transformed. In the eighteenth century the Hasidic movement shaped itself around miracle-working saints while other rabbis denounced these wonder-working rebbes as charlatans.

Modern liberal movements are not the first to read Torah and come to new understandings of its meanings. It's been a ceaseless process. Biblical law permits slavery, although it prohibits lifelong indentiture. There is a six-year limit. Later, when cities and trade expanded and free labor emerged, the sages made it clear that owning slaves was morally unacceptable. The Torah was read, correctly, as a protest against all forms of slavery and bondage and the spirit of the law was allowed to cancel a more literal previous understanding.

Slavery is no longer a live problem, but woman's rights are. Traditional Judaism separated men and women in the synagogue, forbade a woman to appear as a witness in civil cases and sanctified sex differentiated roles, " a woman of valor looks well to the ways of her household," but the Torah also speaks of human dignity and contains biographies of women who were liberated for their age: Miriam; Atalish, a reigning queen; the prophetess, Huldah. One can argue that the whole separation bit which is symbolized by the women's

balcony in an orthodox synagogue represents a Torah understanding regressively effected by the harem mentality of the oriental world. There is no rule in the Torah that a woman must be treated as an inferior or relegated to housewifely roles; indeed, the equality of persons could, by a differently focused exegesis, be derived from one element of the creation story: "male and female created He them."

The revelation of the covenant to Moses and its acceptance by Israel is the founding and controlling myth, but this myth cannot be taken as a factual description of what actually happened. Critical scholarship has proven that the Mosaic law is a mosaic and that the Torah is an edited anthology of various Israelite traditions; but this is not to say that the Torah was a priest's fabrication foisted on an uneducated and rude mass or idle faction. Not at all. The Torah is a distillation of a religiously talented people's religious awareness; Sinai is an insightful myth. Myth, need I remind you, does not mean fancy or fiction but a sacred story; a vision of the world as it really is, life as it really should be led, and the future as it really will be. A myth may not be literally true, yet far truer than the presentation of a series of facts.

Didn't the rabbis recognize those charges for what they were?

No. They preferred to conceive of Jewish history as a continuing unfolding which increasingly exposed the Torah's depths but did not alter fundamentally its teachings. The task of each generation is seen as that of applying the principles implicit in the covenant to whatever new situations arose, to spin out a seamless web of commandments and concepts, all solidly based on the original revelation. The rabbinic sages were fond of saying: "turn it [the Torah] over and turn it over again for everything is in it." Nothing was man-made, hence fallible; the way was God's. Their comments and decisions were simply elaborations of that which was either explicit or implicit in the text. An example: the Torah nowhere mentions that a <u>minyan</u>, ten adult males, is required for public worship. Critical scholarship would probably trace the <u>minyan</u> to the conventional number required for a quorum in West Asia.

We have ten fingers, so even illiterates can tally such a sum. The sages said God decreed the minyan. How so? A Torah text, "how long shall I bear this evil congregation," denounces the spies who warned the tribes not to attack Canaan. There were ten such spies from which it followed that God meant that a congregation should consist of at least ten.

Why weren't women counted?

There were no Mata Haris among the agents.

Such commentary allowed you to find what you need and 'knew' to be Torah without any sense that the Torah was being tempered with. If there was no available text the letter of the law gave way to its informing spirit. The Torah requires that all debts be cancelled on the sabbatical year. This rule was an attempt to protect poor farmers who had to borrow each spring for seed from falling hopelessly into debt if they suffered several bad harvests. Often, such unfortunates had no alternative but to sell themselves or members of their family into slavery. As urban society began to emerge and as money replaced barter as the basis of trade, this humane rule began to be counter-productive. As the remission year, the seventh year, approached, interest rates began to go sky high and quickly passed the point where farmers could not afford to borrow for seed or tradesfolk to buy raw materials. Subterfuge became widespread until, in the first century, the rule was gotten around by the use of carefully crafted legal devices, written so as to safeguard the letter of Torah law while, at the same time, permitting debts to run through the year of release. We see such a change as a natural element in a develop-mental process, but because of the way the change was effected by ordained teachers, using familiar language, not seen as such.

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

Another voice: Political circumstances and anti-semitism have brought it about that we constitute a community of fate, but are we also a community of faith? Given the evident diversity of practice and approval, what are the shared elements?

I never know how to answer a question that begins: what does Judaism believe about. . . I can answer: this is the way it was in Biblical times and this is the approach which was taken in rabbinic times, and this is what I think. To talk in terms of process, development, growth and the unfolding of a religious tradition, the only way I can deal with religious questions is to rule out a once and final definition. Institutions which do not change petrify and die. Ideas which are not reformulated become irrelevant.

When Karo prepared his manual the political and cultural circumstances of Jewish life were almost everywhere the same, so, although there were saintly folk and crude folk, learned men and illiterates, Jewish life gave off an aspect of coherence. No longer. Some Jews live in a Jewish State, others in the various communities of the diaspora. For most the reality of a culturally uniform and uniformly Jewish environment is no more. We live in the culture of public schools and television. Our minds are more often occupied with the social sciences and liberal arts than Torah and Talmud, and our understanding of Torah necessarily has been transformed by the intellectual currents which make our age so new, exciting and confusing. Should we be surprised that Rabbi Silver looks at the Torah quite differently from Rabbi Karo?

I am a rabbi. I am committed to the Torah tradition and I believe in many of the rabbinic positions about God, practices and values; yet, when I read the various manuals which purport to describe Judaism, I often find myself vigorously shaking my head. I would balance some ideas differently and there are ideas that I do not accept. Is this heresy? Not at all. I am not a maverick. Rabbinic Judaism is a venerable tradition, but no longer the dominant one. When I was ordained I was not required to affirm a particular catechism nor must I submit my writings to a superior's censorship. The promise that I was asked to make on that beastly hot June day was that I would confront Torah with love and respect, with the respect of one who was at home within its spirit and the love of one who felt close to the whole Torah family.

In Karo's day writers often used the image of a tree as a model with which to describe the organic development of Jewish life. The seedling had been planted at Sinai. Over the centuries the trunk had thickened as each generation added its understandings of the basic truths, faith in God's existence and oneness. Over the years the main branches had lengthened and become more solid as commentary added detail to such themes as free will, providence and the messianic promise which grow out of God's revelation of His nature. Each season the tree leafed and later shed its leaves as communities developed customs peculiar to their circumstances and then, under new circumstances, changed or abandoned these.

The image is an attractive one for those who draw encouragement from the idea of eternal verities, through it all the tree retained its original shape, but its appropriateness as a description of what actually occurred must be questioned. Imagine Moses resurrected among us and on a visit to the most traditional synagogue in the area. Ask yourself what his reaction would be to what he would see and be told about the religion he had helped to found. Synagogues developed a thousand years after Moses' death. The first rabbi was ordained more than thirteen hundred years after Moses anointed Aaron as High Priest. If I took Moses to the Ark and opened the scroll which bears his name, he could not read it. The Torah script, though antique, uses an alphabet which emerged several centuries after his death. It is even doubtful he would recognize the scroll since the Torah did not achieve its present form until perhaps seven hundred years after his death.

I would replace the tree image with another. I look on the Torah tradition as, indeed, I look on all the major religious traditions, as a mighty river, say the Mississippi. The Mississippi begins as a small stream feeding a clear-water Minnesota lake, and flows down several thousand miles to the Gulf of Mexico. The Torah begins in an event, the Exodus, and in a revelation whose substance we cannot fully recover and flows down three thousand years until today. I doubt that many of the molecules of water

which emerge at the Mississippi's source actually reach the Gulf. Some are lifted away by evaporation. Farmers draw water for irrigation. Cities draw water to support their population. Other waters mix into the stream. The rains fall. Tributaries mingle with the original stream. The Mississippi is a single river but as it flows it changes its aspect. Sometimes it runs calmly for miles. At other times it races through rocky rapids. In Jewish life there have been quiet and uneventful centuries and times of dramatic change. Much of what existed in Abraham's day is no longer, but the mighty stream flows on. I can locate the Mississippi on the map and I can bathe in its waters but I cannot deny its changeful nature. The Mississippi flows in a single direction, drawn on by the fall of the land and the spin of the earth, by God's hand. The Jewish experience flows into history, drawn on by changing times, the changing needs of Jewish life and God's creative purpose. The present emerges out of the past, but is not identical with it.

The Torah's symbolic role is to suggest coherence and continuity. The Torah's actual text provides the conceptual and calendrical skeleton of Jewish life. Specific holidays and the Sabbath are mandated by the Torah, but we celebrate differently than the ancient Israelites did and we interpret Torah language to other purposes. The past has force, the current flows in one direction, but it is the confluence of current with our needs and interests which determines the shape of Torah in our time.

Just as the American Constitution is subject to various kinds of interpretations, some strict, some loose; and many a Supreme Court decision hangs by a constitutional hair, the judge opting for his understanding of the spirit of the law rather than its letter; so Jewish life has been inconsistently consistent. Kabbalists have read into the Torah incredible descriptions of God's nature. Messianists found in Torah the exact date of the final judgment. Philosophers discovered the Aristotelian categories. We are not the first generation to be aware that our understandings have changed. The second-century sage, Akiba, insisted that not only every sentence and phrase had

meaning, but every letter, and even the white space around the letters.

A contemporary midrash describes Moses' hearing of this sage's fame, visiting one of his lectures and being utterly puzzled by interpretations of Torah which were completely foreign to him. Many modern interpretations mark a radical break with rabbinic understandings which had been supported for centuries, but that rabbinic consensus itself included interpretations which were quite different from Israelite understandings. The Torah stipulates capital punishment for a variety of crimes. Rabbinic law discouraged the practice. They did not stop teaching the old law; they simply created due process procedures which limited anyone's exposure to the death penalty and were so successful in doing so that it came to be said that a rabbinic court which carried out a death sentence in a century was a murderous court. Witches were not burned despite the Biblical mandate, and the laws against idolatry were interpreted so that they did not apply to Christiantiy.

Why are recent interpretations so different?

Blame Dr. Einstein. No mindset is adequate if it does not provide for the fourth dimension - time, and the time element forces us to question all claims to immutability. As long as Plato and Aristotle were authorities, thinkers were confident that such terms as justice, freedom and duty were concepts which could be truly and finally defined; consequently, there could be formulations which could be applied to all situations. Today dialectical thought has replaced fixed systems. The dimension of time, the perspective of the observer, must always be considered. We move in a world whose key terms are development and dialectical process. When I speak to business folk I draw an analogy to the change from profit and loss budgets which represent an arbitrary attempt to freeze a business's financial position at an artificial moment and the newer auditing procedures which deal with cash flow and present a moment-by-moment picture of the viability of the business.

I think of religion as teaching truth and something is either true for all times or not true in the first place. If Judaism isn't true, why bother with it?

When a craftsman throws a pot and then bakes it in a kiln, the pot is transformed from idea into an object which now exists independently of the artist. Some analogize the Torah to such a pot. They seem to think that God dictated the Torah scroll and that it now exists apart from God. That's not my understanding. God cannot be separated from His word. Torah is never independent of God but continually emerging and dependent on Him.

I understand why you are uncomfortable when I suggest that our special and mysterious word may not be the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. We gamble our lives on a religious vision and want to feel that it is beyond doubt. Anyone who teaches an undergraduate survey course in religion knows that each year some students go through a crisis of faith when they learn that modern research takes for granted that the Torah was not given in its present form to Moses or that the Gospel documents were edited long after the events they purport to describe; in brief, that the truth is not as they had been taught in Sunday School.

Truth comes from a vocabulary of fixed terms which are now denied to us. Truth is a judgment on the full accuracy of a statement and modern philosophy suggests that the only truths of whose accuracy we are certain are those which apply to systems like mathematics which are our own creations. When we deal with nature and human nature which are God's creations, we can describe process, 'how', but cannot explain purpose. Why? I find the Torah tradition insightful, suggestive, wise. It offers me important hints about the mystery we call reality, but it does not reveal to me the whole truth. There are things we will never know and in many ways it is all for the better.

Many a head has been bashed because of the truth claims advanced by various religions. Each of the major western faiths hold a book sacred whose text, they assert, is revealed. The Jew says easily: 'This is the Torah which Moses received from God on Mount Sinai.' The Christian affirms that God sent down His only son to take on Himself the world's sins and that the record and meaning of Christ's mission is recorded precisely in the gospels and Paul's

letters. The Muslim insists that the angel Gabriel brought Mohammed the Book of Revelation and that the Koran represents his full copy of God's book in God's own language. Those who believe they possess the truth inevitably ascribe the indifference of others to congenital incapacity, invincible ignorance of the work of Satan. Truth claims like gold mining claims in the Old West can lead to bloodshed.

To suggest that these scriptures are not literally true is not to argue that these claims are false or were deceitfully advanced. In each case ideas of transforming power entered a people's consciousness at a particular time and affected, and continue to affect, the lives of millions. A generation ago the sophisticated dismissed revelation talk as the invention of priests or as the delusions of the demented but we have rediscovered the deep well of perception and insight which lies behind and beyond reason. We acknowledge sources of understanding which are lodged in the left side as well as the right side of the brain.

Process words like perception, insight, heightened consciousness, are not so imperial in their implications and allow me to appreciate the spirit and the mind of those who do not fully share my views. I prize my Torah experiences and have been ennobled by them, but since I do not claim that these exhaust truth, I can see other religions as offering more than a pack of lies.

Moreover, truth is not all it is generally cracked up to be. The Christian Gospel's promise: "You shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free" [John 8:32] is a heavy thought but a mistaken one. I know the medical dangers involved in smoking and that I will not fall off the mountain, but knowing does not free me of an addiction or a phobia. This is the age of Dr. Freud as well as Dr. Einstein.

Process is the only way that we can intelligently discuss religious faith unless we are prepared to override cavalierly all the norms of critical discourse and content ourselves with the argument that religion alone, among

human activities, is impervious to the flow of life. Clearly, this is not so and, in point of fact, rabbinic Judaism insists that though the revelation is full and known, the Torah exists, man's comprehension of revelation is never complete. The essential and unceasing Jewish activity is commentary, which is no more or less than the exploration of Torah which allows us to glimpse the light but not fully possess it. Though Jews study the Torah until the messiah comes, we will still not understand it all, and one of the tasks the folklore assigns Elijah as that age dawns is what has escaped our ingenuity and learning.

If the Torah isn't truth why not scrap the old text and start fresh?

Because we would be breaking the tradition and, in fact, starting a new religion.

Gershom Sholem has defined the quintessential Jewish attitude, the way in which Jewing is done, as Talmud Torah, as the process of commentary on the original revelation. The Torah contains various kinds of literature, rules, commandments, poetry, history, proverbs, many of which are not necessarily integrated with all others. One senses a single spirit in the Torah, but the text is rich, varied and compelling. God is in the detail as much as in the assumed synthesis, and the detail forces us to accept complexity and apparent contradictions even as we search for clear guidance.

After my first critical course in the Bible, I was ready to dismiss Scripture as an antiquated collection of myths and legends. Martin Buber taught me to see Torah as the record of a series of meetings between Israel and God during which our fathers opened themselves fully to the mystery of the divine and something of that mystery was apprehended which was set down with words but was much more than those words could express. We might call Torah God's living speech, living in the sense of still being alive and capable of refracting unexpected wisdom. A new text would be a summation of our thought not a revelation of God's.

My rabbi has a few themes which he calls Biblical: the oneness of God, human dignity, social justice, and he weaves his preaching around them. If

the Torah reduces itself to such general terms, it is more than somewhat vague. Are you saying that the Torah is not true but that its informing spirit is true?

I believe there is an informing spirit in the Torah but I'm speaking of a far more sophisticated process that the abstraction of a few high-sounding terms and declaring them to be the whole of God's word. The process of Torah commentary requires a respect for the text itself and careful examination of all its implications. Traditionally, this approach was called midrash. Midrash accepts Torah as the living word of God. If the rules about burning witches and loving one's neighbor seem to represent opposing standards of moral sensitivity, it may be that we have not yet related them appropriately or fathomed the full implications of statements which must in some way be related.

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

What about conflicting interpretations?

The Torah tradition has no problem with interpretive inconsistency. The variety of interpretation reinforced the idea that the Torah was infinitely suggestive, in that sense special, mysterious, divine. The inconsistencies simply meant that each of us looks on thatTorah with his own eyes and mind; we are inconsistent, not God. No one had to agree with our interpretation. Midrash was published by a process of accumulation and little attempt was made at systematic editing. Moreover, what is the virtue of consistency? The rabbis anticipated Emerson's "A Foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds" when they wrote, ' both this statement and another of different import could be seen as the words of the living God.' Life is full of contradictions, consequently the consistency of a philosophic system does not prove

its truth.

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

Revelation is not an invention of crafty priests but a word which describes a people's surprise at some unexpected insight into the human condition. The investigation of Freud, Jung, Eliade and a host of others have helped us see that our fathers were wrestling with the limitations of language when they said unself-consciously: "Thus says God." How else express their certainty that they had seen what they had not known before? How else express the rush of certainty which cleared up confusion? How often have you worried over a decision and thought you had put it out of your mind only to find that the pieces came together when your conscious mind was busy with other problems? The prophets were not babblers who, under drugs, said anything which came into their minds, but sober and responsible citizens who puzzled long and hard over the conditions of their lives and who found that the pieces came together in an unexpected vision.

Back to square one. If Torah always is in the process of becoming how can we define its teachings?

If by definition we mean presenting an unchanging likeness, can't we? When the Torah sits for its portrait each artist paints a different picture.

A little over a hundred years ago Samson Raphael Hirsch, Zacharias Frankel and Samuel Hirsh, contemporaries in German Jewry and fine scholars, each wrote a book defining the essence of Judaism. Samson Raphael Hirsch was a defender of tradition. Zacharias Frankel advocated slow, deliberate change . Samuel Hirsch was a champion of radical reform. Each said some interesting

things about the nature of the Torah tradition, but an outsider reading these three books would have wondered if they were describing the same religion. It was like the Englishman, Frenchman and German describing an elephant; each saw what he was prepared to see, and none succeeded in defining any objective criteria which would enable another researcher to arrive at his conclusions.

Their countryman, Heinrich Graetz, the most famous historian of the Jewish people of the day, reviewed these works in a programmatic essay, "An Introduction to History" (1846), and in which he made it clear that each had read into the Torah tradition exactly what he was prepared to find there. Samuel Hirsch, the great liberal, described Judaism as open-minded, non-dogmatic, this-worldly and committed to civic reform. Samson Raphael Hirsch, whose major accomplishment was the creation of a modern orthodoxy, described Judaism as an all-embracing and ennobling rule which delineated God's will and so allowed man to get beyond the confusions of this life and lead a meaningful life. Frankel tried to balance these views by suggesting the role of the community in establishing norms. Graetz described these works as impressionistic studies, essentially the work of connoiseurs who possess a good eye but whose conclusions remain subjective, an art form. Their descriptions were insightful, contradictory, and personal. It could not be otherwise. When you swim in the river you see only your stretch of water and the near bank.

I often hear people say that Judaism is this-worldly in its orientation. Only one Biblical text speaks of resurrection - a late verse in Daniel. Many Jews are of the impression that Christianity is concerned with Heaven and such things and Judaism is not. The traditional liturgy blesses God as "reviver of the dead", and rabbinic literature routinely describes this world as 'a corridor into the World to Come'. Medieval sermons breathed a good bit of hell-fire-and damnation. The modern synagogue has left Dante behind, but that's another matter. If anybody says to me: this is Judaism, this is Torah-true, everything else is false, I must ask: whose Judaism are you talking about? The Judaism of Akiba? The Judaism of Moses? The Judaism of the

Baal Shem Tov? The Judaism of Daniel Silver? It is precisely the developmental aspect of the tradition, incidentally, anything alive is constantly and necessarily in flux, which makes any manual false to the range, depth and sensitivity of the Torah experience. I love the Biblical phrase, "a fountain of living waters." It suggests the infinite depths, the ever present but changing present, and the enlivening aspect of Torah to those who will pause to look and drink.

Another related example. Many like to think of the Torah tradition as appreciative of the physical and as accepting of love and sex as natural. The Torah, it is claimed, does not mandate celibacy or regimens of denial or monasticism, and this position is contrasted favorably with religions which encourage ascetic devotions. What shall we do then with the Nazerites and the Rechabites of the Israelite period, itinerant holy men who did not cut their hair, drink wine, live in cities or wear ordinary clothes? During Greco-Roman times the Essenes and the Dead Sea peoples of Qumran built wilderness monasteries where they practiced various austerities. Hasidim of the eleventh and twelfth century bathed in cold rivers and endured long vigils. The Kabbalists encouraged fasting and mystical exercises of many kinds. In recent times many of the Hasidic rebbes and Musar leaders of Eastern Europe followed a regimen of denial. Within the Jewish continuum there has been a tendency to look on the flesh as evil, or if not evil at least as that which beguiles and trips us up; asceticism was not the major theme but, clearly, it was not an inconsequential one.

If Judaism were a fixed doctrine, it is doubtful that Jews would have insisted that religious leadership requires learning. Doctrinal traditions can be memorized and, because a rote tradition can be deadly, tend to find their leaders among charismatics as well as scholars. In such cultures it is not unusual for the barely literate to be seized by the Holy Spirit and to be accorded preaching authority. Some Talmudic rabbis and the Hasidic rebbes were faith healers and amulet makers; but, among Jews, charisma without learning was suspect. Oriental Jews call their leader Hacham, wise one. European Jews

called their leader, rav. Rabbi means teacher. Some rabbis were mystics who had experienced a transforming spiritual experience, but without learning the claim to be possessed of the Holy Spirit did not assure anyone of authority.

A complaint: You speak as if change inevitably meant progress, you mentioned that the Torah condemned magical practice; why did you not add that the rabbis of the Middle Ages not only tolerated but promoted charms and amulets.

Accepted. Progress is a hope not a reality. How many of us would claim that our sensual and materialist generation brings more ethical sensitivity or basic empathy to the concerns of society than some earlier communities? The rabbinic treatment of woman is less liberated than the Bible's. One of the values of Torah is that it remains what it is, an unchanging Word, even when our use of it is fumbling and uninspired.

Accepting your river analogy, what is a Jewish value: The Bible says you may stone an adulterer and burn a witch. The Talmud says women cannot be trusted as witnesses and that a woman remains married unless a witness reports he actually saw her husband's body. Rabbinic authorities refuse most requests for autopsies and the orthodox in Israel have made their adamancy a political issue. I know the Bible, the Talmud, and the rabbis say many other things: "Love your neighbor as yourself", "Seek peace and pursue it", "Be of the disciples of Aaron, loving peace and pursuing it, loving all fellow creatures", "The world is founded upon three things: upon truth,justice and respect". I can't pull these two attitudes together. Which are the real Jewish values?

Jewish values are the values of the existing Jewish community and they are never more than an approximation of Torah values. Jewish values is a term which should be used with great care for it is no more or less than what Jews of a generation sense to be right and good when they seriously confront Torah and their present.

You seem to be saying that there can be more than one Jewish approach.

There can be. There have been.

Religion cannot be seperated from the processes which affect everyone.

The river, Jewish life, flows on; one river, yet ever changing. There are those who float with the current, preserving the past, letting it flow through them and those who seek to dam and control the flow of the river as it flows by, to so take and use its waters in ways that modern science only now allows. The Torah is out there and in us.