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Come On In, the Water's Fine, unpublished manuscript, fifth draft,
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COME ON IN, THE WATER'S FINE: An Investigation
of Jewish Identity

Introduction - Towards A Philosophy of Jewish Survival

- Chapter 1 Doing What Comes Naturally
- Chapter 2 My Faith and Our Religion
- Chapter 3 Can A Leopard Change His Spots?
- Chapter 4 Why Keep At It?
- Chapter 5 The Tree and the River
- Chapter 6 Being Good Isn't Enough
- Chapter 7 Think Boldly But Think
- Chapter 8 Judaism Is
- Chapter 9 But I Don't Believe In God
- Chapter 10 The God Who Lets Us Cry
- Chapter 11 The Generation Gap
- Chapter 12 What Should I Do?
- Chapter 13 True and Enduring Is Thy Word - Or Is It?
- Chapter 14 Is Man The Messiah?
- Chapter 15 The Promise of Land
- Chapter 16 It's Good To Be A Jew



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 the most important fact of their lives; not only inevitable but a blessing. Their lives revolved around the myth that God had declared Israel an am-seculah, 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 ~~all~~ things happen, it is alive, and so 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, dayyemu, 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 Israel. 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 aside 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 grounds, 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, they 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 Judaism with Christianity, Zen Buddhism, some Indian cults and the 'human potential' movement. 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 bad-mouthing, 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 since 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 ties, 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 existential 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," says 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 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 exudes 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 conventional commonplaces. "We must not confuse this application of the word (mission) with that given to it in speaking of those poor monks who set forth for the wild places of the world to carry the Christian gospel to cannibalistic 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 eradicate 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, synagogue worship and traditional learning, came to be seen as inconsequential, if not as distractions. Piety was not pooh-poohed. 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 desperate 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 mission 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 that 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 naive 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 the 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 indispensable, that without us civilization would disappear, and social progress 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 indispensable 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 fixed 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 - - - took place in - - -

schoolyard baseball for after-school Hebrew lessons, but I came to appreciate the ties of family and, in retrospect, am pleased my mind was nurtured by a high religious culture rather than 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 to 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 familiar. 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 temperament 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 unconditioned "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 House 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 than 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 de Madrigal).

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 day 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 Judaism 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 scientific than the 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 human 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 idiosyncrasy. 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.



Someone quoted Alfred North Whitehead to you and this is a case where a fine religious vocabulary is lacking. Faith is what a person does with his loneliness. Faith is our private speculation of and commitment

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.

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 draw 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 affected 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 Nuremberg 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 proletariat. 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 involve 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 doctriate. 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; calendar, 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 mediaval 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 or 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 Fuehrer 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 commend

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 Assisi. 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, le'havdil, to distinguish. In common speech when someone suggested that there were differences in quality or kind between phenomena of the same order he said le'havdil. So the sentence: Jim Jones and le-havdil Martin Luther King were ministers in the Civil Rights Movement; or the Jonestown commune and le-havdil an Israeli kibbutz are rural utopian communes. One must constantly make le-havdil 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 Nazism 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 untrammelled 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 presumed to atone for Adam's sin and opened the way of salvation to the believer. Abraham's loyalty to God's command, 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 sin 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 confident 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 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 besmert, 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, Shabbetai 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.

The Jesuits were reputed to claim that if they could force 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 basal teshuva, usually middle-aged persons who for years went their way but now feel a pang to come in out of the secular cold.