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Come On In, the Water's Fine, unpublished manuscript, fifth draft,
chapters 1-5, pages 1-97, undated.

Chapter 3

CAN THE LEOPARD CHANGE ITS SPOTS?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Jewish involves.

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

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

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

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

What makes a Jew come alive as a Jew?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

section, as announced to Abraham. The full covenant, with all the rules

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Why was Israel chosen? At first no one really asked 'why'; they simply accepted gratefully. Later it was suggested that Israel was chosen precisely because she was the least significant of the nations. If God could take the least likely and raise them on high, what could He not accomplish (Deut. 7:6-7)

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

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

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

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

I thought that Jews didn't seek converts.

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

But there are no Jewish missionaries.

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

Why are we accused of being clannish?

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

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

Protest came from another direction.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

methods and has no one else to defend her.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Our numbers are significant only in the United States and Israel. We console ourselves that quality, not quantity, counts. Incidentally, like the source of our interest in Jews are their important artistic and scientific contributions.

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

Chapter 4

WHY KEEP AT IT?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

As a political outcast the Jew found his political interests naturally

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

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

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

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

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

Where, then, did we get such ideas?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

That's incredible.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

ability was to create these refuge cities to which a man could flee until

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

the shrine King Solomon built in Jerusalem.

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

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

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

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

You're back to 'outside' talk.

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

Chapter 5

THE TREE AND THE RIVER

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Why weren't women counted?

There were no Mata Haris among the agents.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Why are recent interpretations so different?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

What about conflicting interpretations?

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

its truth.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

There can be. There have been.

Religion cannot be separated from the processes which affect everyone.

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

