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Come On In, the Water's Fine, unpublished manuscript, fifth draft,
chapters 6-16, pages 98-257, undated.

Chapter 6

BEING GOOD ISN'T ENOUGH

The conversation began with a comment from an aide. A religious school principal called me the other day and asked me to be a substitute teacher. I agreed and was surprised by the changes. We had Hebrew and History classes, they still do; but now there were classes in Hebrew lettering, Jewish cooking and a group who spent part of the morning carpentering a wooden ark for an overnight camp.

In recent years some religious schools have emphasized Jewish experiences; Hebrew camps, Israeli dance festivals and shul-ins as well as course work and language mastery on the valid grounds that the only way to appreciate the full range of what it means to be a Jew is to jew: to celebrate Sukkot, to participate in the burial of a used Sefer Torah or to spend some time on a kibbutz or moshav in Israel.

Not so long ago Jews lived in a Jewish environment, jewing came naturally and the religious school simply provided background information which explained the Jewish world in which the child was caught up. Today's child grows up in a fragmented environment. His home is a middle-class place, an American place, a television place, a public school place, as well as a Jewish place. Many homes are lean on Jewish experiences. His parents may be deeply committed but that commitment may be a civic one which he may not be able to observe. So unless the institutions of the Jewish community, particularly the religious school, provide Torah experiences he would never taste its flavor and color. The result would be what it is, I am afraid, for many, that they think of the Torah tradition as a few candles, a prayer or two and a set of disembodied ideas floating out there, as a religion which has no immediate relationship to their lives.

Neither logic nor factual information ever impelled anyone to become a committed Jew or Christian or Marxist. We are thinking animals, but when it comes to ultimate commitments the heart rules the head. We use facts after the fact to rationalize our decisions. I teach in the Department of Religion

of a local university and, as you would expect, my courses focus on Judaism. Ministers and nuns have been among my best students. Their previous training heightens their ability to assimilate theological ideas and to put these into a comparative perspective. I hope they gained from the course some appreciation of our tradition, but I am sure that nothing they learned changed their basic loyalties.

Disembodied ideas, however golden, do not a Jew make. I know a good bit about Christianity and Islam, far more probably than the average communicant, but I am neither Christian nor Muslim. Religious involvement requires commitment rather than comprehension. Many believers know only that they believe. Theologians with careful arguments provide the faithful with understanding of their commitments. That art is called apologetics and, as its name, so it is - after, rather than before, the fact. Logic never persuaded anyone to reciprocate feelings they did not respond to. If you want to answer the question why be a Jew, you have to get in the river and swim.

A cool voice I hadn't heard before. Experience has become a big thing in our country: soul, consciousness raising, the greening of America. My friends use words like spontaneity, being genuine, and 'getting in touch with'; and put me down when I say: 'I must think about it.' They call me a coward for not acting spontaneously. Are you among those who have lost faith in reason?

Thinking is the process which makes us human. The animal reacts instinctively, thinks with his nervous system; we reflect and consider. I am sure that the religious school which had these programs in dance and carpentry also offered classes in Hebrew and History. No Jew can glorify unreason, but reason is not the only key to a meaningful life: "The heart has reasons of which the mind is ignorant."

I picked up a copy of The Jewish Catalogue.

A few years ago a group of folk from the havurah movement published this volume which they sub-titled, A Do It Yourself Kit. Their introduction

said that "this book was designed to open options for personal Jewish creativity and contemporary utilization of the rites and rituals of Jewish life." Forgive them the jargon. What they offered and what was eagerly appropriated, the book sale was a minor publishing phenomenon, was a step-by-step guide to writing your own ketubah, baking matzah or decorating a sukka. Here was a way to do Jewish things rather than to have them done for you; and the authors argued, with effect, that such experiences can be the first step in a meaningful religious awareness.

I found the success of The Jewish Catalogue a fascinating phenomenon for many reasons, not the least of which was that it seemed to signal the end of an age during which the Torah's reasonableness and the pragmatic value of its commandments was its major selling point. The dietary laws were praised as hygienic. The Sabbath day was held up as an early labor law. Yom Kippur provided an opportunity for an annual spiritual examination which was as good for you as your annual physical. Many set great store by the argument that the Torah tradition was reasonable while Christianity required an irrational leap of faith and rather reveled in unreason. Had not some of the Church Fathers defended the myth of Christ's resurrection on the grounds that the mind could not have invented such a miracle. QED it must have happened. Credo quia absurdum est. Judaism's presumed virtue was that it was credible. God could only be one. There was no nonsense about a son of God or a virgin birth. The prophets' virtue was their moral vision. Rabbinic law provided a functioning structure which made possible the survival of a disadvantaged minority. The case was often made, and many of the arguments offered were cogent, but, as a compelling argument for Jewish commitment, there was a major drawback. If Judaism is reasonable, why do I need it? Wouldn't it be enough for me simply to be a reasonable person? There was also something a bit unmanly as well as unwise about the need to prove Judaism's rationality. Who were we proving it to? Ourselves? We either felt the Torah tradition in our souls or we didn't. Those out there? Did anyone really care? It often seemed as if we were involved in an exercise

whose only purpose was to prove that it wasn't odd of us to be Jewish.

The world is coming off a rather prolonged love affair with reason which began several centuries ago. The Age of Reason gave us the American Constitution and a vision of the human mind controlling nature and transforming widespread misery into widespread opportunity. Voltaire and his friends insisted that the medieval forms of privilege and authority were unreasonable. Newton and his friends proved that the human mind could explore the universe and gain mastery over nature. Our laboratories and research continue to provide proof of the power of man's mind to increase prosperity, longevity and leisure. The accomplishments of the Enlightenment are many.

Unfortunately, reason is a two-edged sword. Science and technology have lightened the burdens of labor and heightened the danger of atomic holocaust. We have transformed the world about us and outgrown the certainties of the past only to find ourselves wandering without a map in a spiritual wasteland. We know so much that we no longer know what is right, where to go, or how to get there. The future is no longer what it used to be.

Critical philosophy has not provided us certainty or clear direction, a reasonable alternative to the religious vision. How else explain the willing suspension of the critical faculty which allows some of our best and brightest to follow a teen-age guru or obey the simple "do it" of Habad? Reason exposed the limitations of all human institutions and led to a fraying of all relationships: marriage, family and community; and ultimately, to the loneliness of urban man.

The image I have of reason is of the sorcerer's apprentice. According to the Jewish version of that legend, a brilliant scientist-Talmudist of the sixteenth century, Loewe of Prague, a friend of Johannes Kepler, discovered the incantations by which a clay statue, a golem, could be enlivened. When his community was beset by bullies, Loewe decided to use his knowledge to provide a protective escort to the aged and the women. He shaped the clay. He whispered the incantations. He placed a seal bearing the magical name of

God on the statue's forehead and the golem came to life. The toughs got a taste of their own medicine, but in time the golem ran ^{Amok?} amuck and Loewe had to speak the magical words which reduced his automaton to clay.

Sobered by recent experience, the fallout of the Age of Reason, the population explosion, the pollution of the environment, mass production, the depersonalization of an urbanized society, people have begun to put greater emphasis on the left-hand side of the brain, on the soul and sensitivity. Where this is not childish peeve, 'if I can't have everything my way, I won't play', or rampant anti-intellectualism, 'what do eggheads know'; it represents an understandable mistrust of the trained mind uncoupled from a sensitive heart. Dr. Strangelove comes to mind and so does Adolph Eichmann.

Some of the most attractive movements of our time represented attempts to get us back in touch with our feelings and sensitivities in the hope that we will learn to develop our spiritual resources and that a heightened moral sensitivity will somehow allow us to wrest control of our lives from those unemotional minds who work out how many millions of deaths will occur during an initial atomic attack and then base foreign policy on concepts like acceptable levels of risk.

Religious folk joined the move by speaking more of a personal god than the god idea; by bringing the guitar into the sanctuary and by making the worship hour into a time of motion and song rather than for rigid pew sitting. In this new cultural environment the reasonableness of the Torah tradition was no longer its most compelling quality; indeed, many have come to value our tradition precisely for the richness of the feelings and emotions that worship and belonging provide. Audiences responded when Tevye sang: "Tradition. Tradition."

The nineteenth century's emphasis on the mind was also an expression of unease with the passion, intimacy and enthusiasm of the religious life. Hitlahavut, intensity, was associated with the unwashed Hasidic hillbillies of Eastern Europe. During the Age of Reason Jews found themselves for the

first time in the capitals of European culture, going to symphony and lectures, and enjoying the experience. So much was changing, it was the Age of Political Emancipation, that many came to believe that a new social order based on reason would emerge, ending a millenium of political and social ostracism. It did not happen that way. Men proved unreasonable. The times are cold and we need not only the bracing command to seek justice and the strengthening of a congregation that sings together against the darkness but faith in God's power to save. Judaism in the Age of Reason was confident, progressive, reformist. We hope against hope. We work because we have no alternative. Their hope was confirmed by labor-saving devices and bourgeois revolutions. A pervasive sense of alienation and of the tragic binds our experience into a single mental set. If we have hope it derives simply and directly from our faith in God.

Why did attitudes change so dramatically and in such a short time?

For some Jews their sharp awareness of the dark and the tragic began with the failure of the liberal revolutions of 1848. For some it began as blackshirted legions marching through Paris during the Dreyfus trial or with Kishnev. For others it began when Jewish revolutionaries were denounced by their Russian Communist comrades. For some it began on Kristalnacht or with Stalin's purges. For some it began with the British White Paper and the post-war blockade of Palestine or when the Allies organized the Evian and Bermuda Refugee Conferences as empty masquerades designed not to save Jews but to quiet the protests of those who demanded that Hitler's chosen victims be saved. For some it began when when the mosques rang with cries of jihad, holy war, and Arab armies went again and again into battle against Israel. One need speak only one name, Auschwitz, and Jews understand. The shocks have been many and not confined to Jewish life: Coventry, Hiroshima, Czechoslovakia, Vietnam.

They believed in progress. I ask myself how can I accept today's wisdom as necessarily superior to yesterday's revelation simply because it is today's?

Universities did not show up well as centers of truth and character in the nineteen-thirties in Germany or in the nineteen-sixties in America. If today's wisdom is so advanced why are we burdened by a pervasive sense of meaninglessness? Why do we respond instinctively when Martin Buber tells us that wisdom is not in logic, which is a game, but in meeting, which is growth? I remember the woman who told me: enough talk, let's just dance like the Hasidim.

The Jewish Catalogue provided a primer to those who wanted to swim around a bit without having to resolve heavy theologic ideas. It's a 'how to' book. Abstractions were left on the shore. Earlier generations were worried about the Torah tradition's credibility. We are concerned with its viability. They used reason effectively to cut through a logjam of folkways and superstitions so as to allow the river to flow on unimpeded, but overused, reason proved an acid which burned away not only superstition but the sacred. I often think of the inner-directed, outer-directed personality distinction David Reisman made popular some years ago. They worried how the Torah tradition looked to outsiders, whether it passed intellectual muster. We worry whether the Torah makes a difference to us.

There are three ways to see a river: from a spacecraft, from the river bank or as a swimmer, from water level. From the satellite you can look across the whole sweep of Jewish history. The river is seen in clear outline. Its direction is apparent but there is little sense of the speed of the current or of the specific details of any particular mile of the stream. You can see but not touch or smell or hear.

From the bank you can see a few miles each way. Details are clearly defined, but what is around the bend is hidden. You are still an observer though the river, or part of it, is close at hand and you can sense its presence and hear its flow, but not feel the water against your skin.

The swimmer sees only a few yards in each direction but he is alive to the river. He, too, does not know what is around the next bend, but he can

feel the current which tries to pull him along. The Jewish Catalogue is for the swimmer. To know the feeling of being a Jew you must take the plunge, but having entered the water you must make sure you are swimming in a safe part of the river. Jewish life is not without its stretches of quicksand and whirlpools.

My parents went to services some weeks ago when the youth group was in charge. They came away aghast. The readers wore sport shirts. There were guitars and no organ. There was no sermon. Someone showed Sierra Club slides and read a parable by Elie Wiesel. During the Shalom Aleichem everyone linked arms and swayed back and forth as they sang. It was folksy, not my folks' cup of tea. Aren't you talking about a generational thing?

It goes deeper. The change is as much cultural as generational. Some have argued that the generational divide is between those who were caught up in the buoyancy and optimism which characterized the nineteenth century and this twentieth century preoccupation with the tragic. I think the differences are deeper and subtler and I sometimes characterize them by calling the one attitude Maimonidean and ours Ha-levian. Moses Maimonides was a towering intellect, master of all the rabbinic disciplines and a firm believer in the redemptive power of reason. Judah ha Levi was a poet of sensitive heart and passionate feelings; a philosopher who was willing, indeed eager, to acknowledge reason's limits.

Maimonides trusted only the mind. The heart was impulsive; only the mind was constant and clear. He was proud that the Torah explained itself in 'acceptable philosophical' terms. The mitzvot were God's will, but, happily, mental health and personal hygiene were enhanced through them. Maimonides was an elitist who held that an able man could master life through the determined use of his intellect. The noise of the synagogue next door often distracted him and he looked on the occasional parading of the Torah around the hall as vulgar behavior appropriate for the masses but not to the enlightened few. His prayer was the calm outreaching of the mind rather than the uncontrollable expression of need by a troubled heart.

Maimonides wrote prose, brilliant analyses which awe the reader with their analytic precision and logical acumen. He provided sophisticated answers to the sophisticated questions asked by intellectuals but had little time for the simple needs and confessions of ordinary folk. He defended Jewish interests at the governor's court, he was that worthy's physician, but he did so by quiet representation and not by angry remonstrance. One simply cannot imagine Maimonides in an unbuttoned shirt, sitting cross-legged at a campfire, holding hands with neighbors while he sings along with them a series of Hebrew folk songs. The Maimonidean spirit, like the spirit of American Jews until a generation ago, was critical, catholic in its interest, elitist, dignified, uneasy with emotion, pleased that the Torah tradition was reasonable, high-minded and wise.

Judah ha Levi trusted his heart. He had studied philosophy long enough to be impressed by the bitterness with which philosophers disagreed, so he was not abashed when he stepped beyond the limits of logic. His philosophy instinctively shaped itself into a drama. The inconsistencies of talk were dearer to him than the orderliness of theory. The mind is a useful instrument but only the heart encourages men to make lasting commitments. Ha Lévi sang openly of his feelings and spoke easily to all whom he met. He trusted people and paraded around the synagogue without any self-consciousness.

Maimonides married to have children. Ha Levi sang of love, wine and nature; and sometimes warily of the temptations of the flesh. He rejoiced in friendship and in the bustle of life. He would be charged with occasional excess, but never with indifference. Maimonides spoke gravely and advised the diaspora to face its problem with patience and prudence. Ha Levi impatiently went up to Zion where, according to legend, he was cut down by Arab cavalry as he prayed before the gates of Jerusalem. He was scandalously committed to the mystery of Israel's chosenness and cried for the Messiah. Ha Levi's spirit was full of feeling, passionate and compassionate, democratic, poetic, responsive to the grand redemptive themes, intensely Zionist and, above all,

steeped in and concerned with the fate of this people.

The times have made Halevians of most of us. The emphasis is on the Torah tradition as itself. Western civilization has let us down. The Torah tradition is significant not because it is the same but precisely because it is significantly special. At least that is the hope. Maimonides justified Judaism by showing that its teachings corresponded to philosophic concepts his age accepted as reasonable. Ha Levi struggled to show Judaism as a distinctive reality and he judged its teachings by their impact on the living rather than on their logical consistency.

The Halevian Jew dismisses all institutional divisions which keep us apart as scandalous. The real divisions are not between Reform and Conservative, kippah or no kippah, but between indifference and concern. We are few, and the enemy is at the gates. The Halevian seeks community. A recent survey of congregations summed it up with this observation: "No single conclusion registers so strongly as our sense that there is among the people we have come to know a powerful, perhaps even desperate, longing for community" (Reform Is A Verb). The synagogue must be a place where a Jew can overcome the loneliness of urban life.

Then it must become a less formal place.

We are a less formal generation. Life is simply not orderly and the synagogue must be an alive place where something can happen to the spirit

happening. I once studied synagogue programs and found that over a generation there had been a measureable shift from archeology to Torah in study, from lists of Jewish notables to Anne Frank, in sermon references and from lectures on the origin of the holidays to the worship experience itself. Even liberal Jews who once mocked law now talk of the need for a guide for practice; not so much, I suspect, because they want to be told what to do but because they want to feel that their practices are not antique relics but mitzvot, sacred acts.

Wait a minute. I remember being taught in religious school that

Judaism could be defined as ethical monotheism and that the core of Judaism consisted of a few simple truths about morality, justice and a just and gracious God. It all seemed clear. You're making Judaism complicated.

These Jews who reduce the Torah tradition to ethical monotheism believed that Israel's mission was to offer moral leadership to the world. No one paid any attention to their plans, or if they listened they declared our teachings subversive. Others, like Franz Rosenzweig, taught that Israel's mission was to provide the world with a symbol of the eternal way men so rarely travel. The Holocaust was too high a price to pay to be someone else's symbol. The assumptions of such a mission now seem either sheer arrogance, 'how many of the unknown saints of our world are Jews', or a forlorn illusion, 'who really saw the pioneers of the Yishuv turn the barren soil of Palestine into a green place and, if they saw, why did they arm nations eager to ravage these fields and towns?'

The Torah tradition is ethical, monotheistic and much more. There is Rosh Hashanah, the Sabbath, the huppah and yahrzeit, Hebrew and Yiddish, Ayn Kelienu and the Hatikvah - a rich, varied and compelling religious civilization.

We have need of the warmth of ritual. It's cold out there. The youth have shul-ins. Parents arrange Sabbath dinners to learn the words and the songs which they can sing with their children around their own table. You're here at this Institute. Such is our need that we have wrapped the shtetl in Fiddler on the Roof nostalgia. The shtetl was poor, full of misery and cruelty, a bleak place, not the Paradise Lost that we have imagined it to be, but its intimacy and color are in sharp contrast to the dreamy urban sprawl in which we lead our partially alienated lives and seems eminently desirable.

We no longer accept the narrow definition of the Torah tradition as prophetic Judaism. It is ethical and more. The Torah tradition defined as prophetic Judaism, the shape given to it by liberal Judaism, helped break Jews

from a tendency towards passivity imposed by centuries of subjugation, but it is a limited and simplistic definition which tended to diminish all that contributes to the religious life. The Torah tradition is not fully comprehended by those who say: "I live by the Ten Commandments. That's what it's all about. Who needs the synagogue" or "I'm involved in the Peace Movement and I don't need all that ritual stuff"; a Johnny One Note Judaism is precisely that, narrow, repetitive, not at all compelling. How long can anyone listen to one sound?

There's another problem. What does it mean to say 'I obey the ten commandments?' Usually those who preen themselves in this way mean little more than that they don't beat their wives, break into another's home, are reasonably honest in business, give a few dollars to various charities and help out with Little League. Wrenched out of the context of a sensitive religious system which raises up all aspects of morality, a few rules are simply that, naked words, which can mean much or little.

The big bold pronouncements about justice and righteousness which abound in the prophetic literature and are heard routinely from some pulpits are precisely that, big, bold and vague. Several generations of social engineering have taught me much about the evil that well-intentioned but unsophisticated planners can do. Told to build freeways, bury engineers did; and their miles of asphalt and concrete destroyed much of the sense of neighborliness which had made our cities livable. Simplificites simply will not solve complex problems which interestingly corresponds closely to the case-by-case analysis used by the rabbis who examined a problem from all sides and tried to apply principles from the body of Torah jurisprudence before making a judgment. Ethical commitment of a high order there must be, and wisdom of a high order in its application.

All this reminds me of a philosophy course I took last term during which the teacher introduced us to a mindset he called existentialist. If I understood him, existentialism denies the ability of abstract reason to comprehend

life. You learn by living. Meaning emerges from involvement. The goal is to deepen our experiences and get more out of each opportunity, not to find words which seem to explain but really do not explain what life is all about. Persons, not systems; intensity of feeling, not detachment; concern, not analysis. In the sense that existentialism makes a distinction between definition and affirmation and emphasizes affirmation, I have been arguing from a similar perspective. The label, Jew, is a label, something external, if you are not actively doing Jewish things. The Torah tradition must pass time tests: Is it reasonable? Is it functional, supportive of growth and maturity? Is it compelling?

I know I want the Torah to assert an autonomous claim. Abraham Joshua Heschel put the issue squarely: The doors of Western culture are open before him and whenever he wishes to enter he finds a welcome place. Why should he not assimilate? The worthwhileness of belonging to the Jewish people must not be taken for granted. Why should he not detach himself from the Jewish community and join another community? Can we in all sincerity say to the Jew: "He who separates himself from Judaism commits spiritual suicide?" The goal is to discover what is authentic and meaningful in our special and mysterious world. I must go beyond the narrow confines of logic which can describe passion. When the need to believe, the rush to faith, is strong as it is now, like any stream, it can break over its bank and become a destructive flood. Fortunately, there seems to be a balance at the heart of the Jewish

For all of our new-found interest in feeling and spirit there is a clear and present danger in setting aside logic and reason and glorifying emotionalism and feeling. Our emotions and feelings can lead us to serve devilish causes. The heart can run away with us as easily as the mind. Hitler's youth were whole-heartedly, honestly committed to the Fuehrer's goals.

You seem to be saying contradicting things. First you say go swimming. Then you say stay on the bank and take stock.

It is a matter of degree. The Maimonidean thought too much and there

was room to balance reason with feeling. The Halevian runs the danger of thinking with his feelings which can be suicidal. As always the advice you get from the synagogues speaks to both sides of life; contradictions. There is danger that we may never act. Becket's Waiting for Godot speaks to this side of the modern temper. Two tramps wait, hoping that Mr. Godot will come. Their lives are empty. Godot is their hope for the future but they are not sure Godot is real or that, if he comes, he has the power to transform their lives. They wait. Nothing happens. It's time to stop waiting and do something. Both acts end with the line: 'Let's go'; and neither moves. Becket has dramatized the deepest pessimism of our age. We are trapped. There is no redeeming gospel. No effort on our part will bring nearer the Kingdom of God.

The Torah tradition has little patience with an inferiority which leads to lethargy. There is a commanding voice which we must heed: "Seek justice, correct oppression, defend the fatherless, plead for the widow's activism. Israel did not wait endlessly but set out on the long road to the Promised Land. Neither they nor Moses had a precise plan. We cannot and should not wait until someone presents us a completely detailed triptik. We will see the future that clearly, but we must move out and do the right, act with the materials and opportunities at hand, trusting that what we sincerely try to do well will be useful to us and serve God's purpose.

Fortunately, there seems to be a balance at the heart of the Jewish experience which says, "take hold of this but do not leave go of the other." We have had our enthusiasts. We have had our phlegmatics. But when you look at the broad cutlines of Jewish thought you discover that our tradition tends to reject either/or decisions in favor of a both/and attitude: both the cultivation of the mind and the cultivation of the soul. With us it's not total abstinence but drink in moderation and sing the Kiddush. Piety is important but our daily responsibilities must be discharged: "If you had a sapling in your hand and someone calls out: 'Lo, the messiah comes, plant the

sapling first and then go to meet him.'" Materialism and greed were condemned as sins but poverty is no proof of virtue just as wealth is no proof of an evil character. The Jew prayed every day: "Grant us peace"; but pacifism was not declared an absolute rule. Self-defense was permitted on the Sabbath. Faith in God did not lead to any disparagement of human capacity. Man is neither demonic nor angelic by nature but both; and our actions are therefore rarely wholly saintly or wholly devilish. There can be fools for Christ but the strangeness of the phrase, fools for Torah, speaks volumes.

How do we know how to balance feeling and reason?

Go swimming and then dry yourself off and think about the experience. All I've been saying is that it won't help you at all to think about swimming if you've never tried it.



Well, why don't you? The evangelists of the world have helped very and whatever their failings, some of the gods have helped straighten out confused kids.

Life is full of contradictions. There are no simple, good-for-all decision rules. Life is a gift of God and precious, but must we attempt heroic measures to sustain a person whose heart and lungs are strong but whose brain has gone? Must we deny a pregnant woman the right to an abortion

Chapter 7

THINK BOLOLY - BUT THINK

Indoors. The afternoon sun had given way to drizzle and dark. Chairs arranged in a circle, a bit too classroom for my taste. I was not surprised to be challenged for not having given simple and no-nonsense answers.

Billy Graham says, 'here it is, take it'. My rabbi says, 'let's think about it'. He likes to research ideas. At times I am not sure he comes to a conclusion. Sometimes I find myself thinking that Judaism is a sponge rather than a shaped religion.

I had expected something of the kind. Judaism's realistic and practical side runs head on into contemporary impatience. The pressure is for quick cures and instant solutions. I remember a young man who complained: 'I want to march to a distant drum and you keep telling me to be careful under whom I enlist.' An emphasis on wisdom breeds its own discontents.

One of the arresting paradoxes of modern times is that the religious traditions which are the most orthodox, evangelical and cocksure are, for many, the most attractive. These groups say: 'here is the way and the truth', and many of the truly free subscribe. Sometimes when I look at my synagogue's half-filled pews I wish I could affect the theological simplicity of a Billy Graham: I am a good preacher and if, in good conscience, I could raise my hands and say, 'Come unto me. Here is the light. Bring me your troubles. Here are answers', I am confident I could fill those pews.

Well, why don't you? The evangelists of the world have helped many and whatever their failings, some of the cults have helped straighten out confused kids.

Life is full of contradictions. There are no simple, good-for-all occasion rules. Life is a gift of God and precious, but must we attempt heroic measures to sustain a person whose heart and lungs are strong but whose brain has gone? Must we deny a pregnant woman the right to an abortion

when there are indications the embryo is malformed? It's not enough to proclaim a few simple so-called truths.

Recently I watched several young aides in our Nursery School who were overseeing the playground. A child fell on his back from a climbing device. A young assistant rushed over, picked up the crying tot and began to soothe it. Her impulsive act of love might have aggravated the injury.

Generosity is a virtue but not always. When the Judeans rebelled against Roman misrule, they were soundly thrashed and harshly punished. Hundreds of thousands were killed. Cities were plundered. Judea's population was pauperized. The few who somehow had been spared the worst were moved to give all they had to the homeless and starving. Unexpectedly, the sages suggested that a limit be put on one's generosity. The limit was a high one, but it was a limit nonetheless. There was no virtue in giving so much that your own family was added to the hapless caravan of need.

In messianic times a little child may lead us, but until then the Torah tradition preferred to entrust authority to the experienced and the wise. Simplicity was not considered a virtue. There is an old saying among us that "the ignorant man cannot be a saint." There may be a certain nobility in turning the other cheek, but a child in a fit of rage or a paranoid with his blood running hot must be restrained for his own well-being as well as for the protection of others. The Torah puts it bluntly: "if a neighbor is attacked one may not stand idly by" even if our interference endangers us. We may believe in non-resistance but abstract theory must not get in the way of saving a life.

The advice that you receive in a synagogue is likely to be pragmatic as well as principled. "I want to drop out of school and do something for the world." Fine, but trained minds and hands can do more for the world than those guided only by enthusiasm. Doesn't the Bible say that man does not live by bread alone? Yes, but without bread man does not eat at all. Where there are no groceries there is no Torah.

The Torah tradition has been called an obdurate morality of common sense (Abba Hillel Silver), but that is not the whole of it. The standard is holiness, not compromise, but the reality is that saints, like scholars, require years of basic training so the Torah includes the ethical A, B, C's: just weights and honest measures, tithes left for the poor, honor shown to one's parents, as well as the more sensitive levels of conduct: to love your neighbor as yourself; not to covet; if your enemy is hungry give him bread to eat; if he is thirsty give him water to drink. There were duties and 'cughts'; sins of commission and sins of omission; a required standard of conduct and a standard which was called "above and beyond the letter of the law." The Jewish curriculum was really little more than a ceaseless attempt to analyze the issues involved in applying Torah principles constructively to the hard realities of life. Talmud Torah can be described as a lifelong study in Jewish values clarification.

Conversation with your rabbi is likely to raise issues that you had not thought of before. We are trained to examine a problem from all sides. You want to get married. It's an intermarriage. The issues seem simple; you're in love and labels are not that important. You've even decided to raise the children as Jews. Have you thought about what the non-Jewish parent will be giving up, the emotional cost; and the danger that "see how much I did for you" will be a constant irritant in your marriage. What will happen to your children when they're shuttled between the two sets of grandparents? Is your love in any way an unconscious desire to hurt your parents; and, if so, is that a good basis for marriage? What about the non-religious differences in your background? A young man who came to talk with me about his plans said as he left: 'you're like the law professor who taught me that in reading a case every possibility has to be followed up'. There is Torah, the basic rules and moral principles; and there is Talmud Torah, a catalog of consequences, the imagination and the mind working out the various scenarios. What you will not hear from your rabbi is: 'it's open and shut.'

Blind faith was never considered a virtue. Faith can work miracles except when it fails to work miracles. A faith healer is successful except when he fails. He helps others except when the time spent with him delays a necessary visit to the doctor. When faith and reason are uncoupled, tragedy can result. Judaism rejected any glorification of emotion or feeling which raised ignorance or innocence into the category of virtues. Jonestown and Nurenberg suggest the possible danger of following charismatic leaders blindly.

Jews knew the cost of blind faith because we were often the victims of fanaticism and because, occasionally, we lost our emotional balance. The seventeenth century was a time of persecution and apartheid, you might call it 'the pits.' Ghetto walls were being raised on all sides. Driven by the logic of desperation which is not logic at all but raw emotion, thousands proclaimed a tormented and neurotic scholar-Kabbalist, Shabbetai Zvi, as the Messiah. Families sold all they had and traveled months to be at his side. Of course, Shabbetai was not the messiah. When told by Turkish authorities he must convert to Islam or die, he converted and his followers found themselves adrift without roots or hope. Many committed suicide. Others followed the leader into Islam. Religion uncoupled from reason, like love uncoupled from reason, is an invitation to disaster.

Faith in faith is not enough. An optimistic faith can help us master our fears and speed recovery from illness, but to argue, as Mary Baker Eddy did, that illness is a state of mind which can be cured by a positive mental attitude is nonsense; and worse than nonsense if we fail to have the bone set or to undergo the indicated surgery. Not so long ago I visited a twenty-three year old in the psychiatric ward of a local hospital. In college she had set her heart on a medical career. Only an average student, she had been rejected wherever she had applied. Undaunted she continued to plan on a medical career despite the advice of her parents and, incidentally, mine, to set other goals for herself. She would be accepted. How could she be sure? She had attended a two-week human potential seminar where she had been

assured that if you set your mind to the task nothing can stand in the way. She did a year of graduate biology, resubmitted her applications, was again refused and suffered a nervous breakdown.

Among the world's religions there are, and always have been, traditions which emphasize intensity in one's religious life, withdrawal and asceticism. Such attitudes have played a role in the Torah tradition; but Judaism did not bring these disciplines front and center and declare living in a monastery or taking vows of celibacy to be marks of a special holiness. Most rabbis lived at home, married, had children, worked at an ordinary occupation and were distinguished by their knowledge of Torah rather than by a particularly arduous religious discipline. We had ascetics who wore hair shirts and bathed in the cold rivers, and mystics who fasted and prayed so that they might sense God; but most were also Talmudists, men of well-trained minds who busied themselves a good part of the day with affairs of the community. The prophetic message was judged by its contents, not by the fact that it had been brought by one who wore a hair shirt. An ecstatic who babbled was a babbler, not a prophet. Midnight devotions, mystical exercises, prayer vigils, were known, but they were not prized above quiet meditation, thoughtful discussion and knowledge of the literature.

Torah study was as essential to the religious life as public worship and private devotion. I remember attending a Greek Orthodox service where the gospel was sung in classic Greek, a language no communicant any longer understood. It was a moving, but not a learning, experience. The Torah also is chanted and many do not understand Hebrew, but for as long as the Torah has been read in the synagogue the rule has been that it is to be translated and for those who may not grasp the text's meaning a paraphrase or explanation, the sermon, is to be offered. Torah reading is not simply a ritual but an affirmation of the continuing relevance of the word to our lives and an exploration of that meaning.

There is no virtue in not knowing. Faith can be misplaced and excessive

and the hope was that knowledge would restrain incipient fanaticism. Cult leaders demand uncritical and unconditioned allegiance and try to convince prospective disciples that ideas other than their views are not only unworthy of consideration but the work of the devil.

When I asked a friend who had spent some time in an ashram about the attraction of a sixteen-year old, pudgy, Indian guru who sits cross-legged with his followers and teaches a vague set of ideas about love, living with less and good vibrations, he told me: "I felt I counted. I was part of an important group. We had truths denied everyone else. The cult leader knew me. I was not a computer punch card. Our leader didn't say much, but life quieted down. He seemed to simplify life. The group was warm and full of good feelings. My head had been in many pieces and I was helped to put it together." Why did you leave: "I discovered that I was being used. I wanted to visit my parents and was told 'no'. I found I was loved only when I obeyed, and that's not love but manipulation."

A voice chimed in: "It is kind of bizarre, but this guy I grew with has a guru. He quotes his master all the time, visits him periodically, and gives over most of what he earns. He says that for the first time he can love everybody. He's got answers and I've got questions."

I would guess your friend's life had been unfocused and he had a deep need for certainty. A century ago, when you closed the door, the world remained outside. Today you may as well not close the door. The world comes in via the television, the telephone and the radio. The home no longer provides the child a coherent environment. His parents say one thing, his peers another. His teachers have their own ideas and Madison Avenue and Hollywood get six hours a day at him through the tube. Our emotions, forced to cope with this abundance of experiences, opportunities and advice could be compared to an overloaded electrical circuit. When energy surges beyond the circuit's capacity a circuit breaker is activated and the mind shuts off. That's when the cult leader comes in: 'don't worry about another breakdown,

I'll do your thinking for you.' He provides emotional security in the overwhelming world of future shock. Silver's rule explains the current popularity of cults and gurus: the more change, the more credulity; which is to say, the more decisions we need to make, the stronger the need to believe that there are simple answers and the more likely we are to have faith in those who assure us they have answers.

So many conflicting ideas are presented to us that we are driven to near distraction, 'my head is falling apart'; in effect, we find ourselves paralyzed and then, in frustration and anger, break out by deliberately suspending disbelief. Perhaps it is inevitable that under such pressure we turn to a father figure or a simple philosophy, but we ought to be clear as to what we are doing. Hasidism failed not because the rabbes were charlatans, some were, many were not; but because as advisers they were limited by their environment and learning and passed on as truth what was, in fact, only the conventional wisdom of their place, and often bad advice. Despite his self assurance, the guru is human and participates in the fallibility which is the hallmark of the human race.

A religion that did not provide a sense of certainty would not survive, but there are all kinds of certainty. There is the certainty that an amulet will protect or that a mystical voice will tell you what to do or that the hands of the minister will heal; and there is the certainty that Torah Drah, the Torah is light, that there is a helpful vision and much wisdom in the rich and varied Torah tradition.

The cults are not the only groups who seek to satisfy this need for certainty. The most popular religions of modern times, Communism and Maoism, demand the absolute submission of their postulants and get it. The Party will think for you. Work and trust your leaders. They know the 'scientific' laws of history and how to make it all come out right. Then there is the Torah. The Torah wants us to turn our minds on, not off. The Jewish experience declares the mind sacred, enshrines learning, counsels respect for the judgment of others, and dares to worship a god who not only demands obedience

but says, "come, let us reason together." Our myths recount that both Abraham and Moses argued with God about various matters. You're not asked to park your mind when you enter the synagogue.

One of my gentile friends found Christ and it is as if she were a different person. She says that her decision to accept Jesus has changed her life, that everything suddenly has become clear and joyous. I have to take her at her word. She is always smiling. I have never felt that surge of clarity and I've never met any Jew who has.

I have a young friend who was something of a rebel until he met a Habad missionary. Now he has answers. It happened quite suddenly during a Habad Sabbath. Now he not only knows but he is remarkably calm.

He sounds well off. I'd like to put my head together.

Everyone would, but there is a price. He will not eat any longer in his parent's home. They are not sufficiently kosher and his girl has left him. She wanted companionship, to be able to touch him in public and not to be badgered to live as he decided to live.

Why did you assume that my friend who had accepted Christ was young?

Most religious conversions occur to young people in their late teens and early twenties.

Why?

There is a statistical correlation between confusion and conversion. Adolescence is perhaps the most confusing passage we ever make. There are so many opportunities, so many questions and few clear guidelines. We are immigrants entering a new country. We've lived among peers and mostly in a school environment. We don't know what we will find when we enter the strange adult world. We don't know what we will find. There are so many decisions to make. During such dangerous passages our longing for certainty, for a confirming system of values, increases geometrically. Simply put, these are the years when we are most susceptible.

You'll admit that your Habad friend is an exception.

Certainly. Our tradition has never focused worship on a confirming

religious experience. Classic Christianity made the gaining of faith primary and so ritualized such moments as Communion and such experiences as giving testimony, both of which focus on a public avowal of one's faith.

A Jew is a Jew. There are learned Jews and indifferent Jews; but no Jew is considered outside the Torah's redemptive promise. The Torah tradition simply is not as convinced as Christianity as to the significance of a sudden transforming experience.

I think I know what you mean. A Jew is a Jew, but there are one to ten Jews. On the one to ten scale, I am a two or three Jew. I went to religious school and I go to services on Yom Kippur. I came here to be with friends as much as for the talk. I've found the discussion interesting. Your approach has lowered my resistance, but I began to want to be a six or seven Jew when we held hands last night around the camp fire, chanted the Havdalah prayers and sang Hebrew songs. No offense meant, but I suspect a warm and open Jewish experience is worth a hundred reasonable explanations of what you keep calling the Torah tradition.

None taken. Our basic commitments transcend reason. Religious commitment is like love. You can't set out to love someone because they fit some perceived analysis of the ideal mate. Love surprises you. It comes on us for many reasons, some of which are unpredictable: Haven't you ever met someone others had insisted you would like and know right off that the chemistry was wrong?

Aren't we back to the Christian emphasis on the transforming moment?

In part. Moses had his transforming moment at the Burning Bush. There are transforming moments; but they are only the first step and the Torah tradition will not make too much of them. If Moses had heard God and not gone back to Egypt the moment would have been meaningless.

On the Jewish scale I'm about a six. I'm a holiday freak. I like being with the family at a Seder table: the food, the songs, hiding the Afikomen. I get a kick when I rattle off "Who knows thirteen" without looking at the

book or taking a breath; so I can appreciate what you've been saying about the binding quality of the rites; but I don't think I'd appreciate the holidays if they didn't convey some important ideas to me. I'm not much for happenings. The Haggadah always gets me thinking about the difference between "freedom from" and "freedom for", about physical and spiritual bondage and about the fate of the Jewish people. I find the holidays both binding and reminding."

Another voice: I'm a two. I find the holidays modestly moving. I'd like to have a transforming experience, but I can't imagine finding God along with the Afikomen.

A voice I had not heard: I can. We had a Russian emigre family for Seder last year. I didn't understand the father's broken English, but I saw the tear in his eye when he read, 'last year we were slaves, this year we are free.' The Exodus was taking place and I sensed the God Who redeems.

Rabbi, we've gotten away from the question. My born-again friend insists that she is a changed and better person since she has taken to Christ. I have enjoyed various moments as a Jew, and I know that being Jewish has conditioned many of my attitudes; but I cannot imagine myself saying, 'hey, everything is clear, I feel saved'. Now that I think of it, I've never heard a rabbi speak of being saved.

Some have described Christianity as faith in faith, and over the centuries the Christian ethos has conditioned the believer to look for the Holy Spirit, and to anticipate the inrush of the Holy Spirit which suddenly resolves confusions and doubts; and, since no blessing is more sought after, to call the resolution of an identity crisis a gift of the grace of God. Modern psychologists explain the inrush of the spirit, the feeling that life falls into place, less theologically: when burdened by indecision and confusion we seek help, our need allows us to tap spiritual resources which up to now have lain dormant, and when they come on stream there is a surge of power which makes us feel what we had not felt before, and since we now have new powers or sensitivities we feel more alive than ever before. In psychological terms being saved is the unexpected feeling of coming alive.

If these powers lie dormant within us why hasn't Judaism created rituals which would help us unlock these capacities?

There are dangers in ritualizing techniques to achieve an emotional high, not the least of which is that redemption is made to pivot on an emotional experience. A single experience, no matter how powerful, is a slender reed on which to hang so much. An identity crisis repositions our hopes, it does not by itself change personality or character. The faithful often slip back into alcoholism or philandering or uncontrollable anger. Guideposts gives only the success stories. Our tradition does not deny such moments or even discourage them, but it does not pivot our religious life about them.

There have been mystics in all ages who knew the inrush of the spirit, the Hebrew term was ruah ha-Kodesh, and a number of medieval manuals describe with some precision how the soul can prepare itself for the mystic moment. Many have sensed the presence of God but no attempt was made to make this feeling an absolute requirement; why make second-class Jews of those who don't experience feelings of this intensity. Not everyone is susceptible to the mystic experience and not every such experience catches the worshipper up in a spiritually significant way. Some come down from the mountain bound to fanatical visions which is why the Torah tried to ground the mystic to the Torah's prescribed way of life. Some come down unchanged.

Why did I think before today that Judaism didn't have a mystical side?

I once heard the rabbi described as a resource person and I remember thinking how completely secularized some recent attitudes toward the Torah tradition have become. Actually, the traditional rabbi was a learned man but learning was only one aspect of his persona. He was also a holy man whose wisdom was acknowledged to go beyond understanding of the rules of divorce or of kashrut. He was known to be pious, but that was not all. His prayers could intercede with God on behalf of Israel or keep the Angel of Death away from a sick bed. So it was in Talmudic times and again among the Hasidim.

You brought your problems to the tzaddik and he gave you good counsel; indeed, he knew your problems before you spoke them. His wisdom worked because you had faith in it; that is, it worked if you were a disciple. I am a sophisticated professional in a highly complex and largely secular environment who has no desire to play God, but I have performed miracles, not because I am an adept or even interested in faith healing, but simply because people come to me expecting a miracle and sometimes what happened between us was what needed to happen.

Sensitive apologetes like Martin Buber have helped us appreciate the humanity, the joyousness, the enthusiastic piety, the immediacy of experience which Hasidism summoned and which is the basis of its appeal to moderns, but there was another side to it. Enthusiasm for the spirit and the immediacy of experience were at times so overwhelming as to block counsels of prudence. No need to consult a doctor. The tzaddik's charm and charisma would be the means of healing. You must attend the rebbe's court so you are advised not to emigrate to the United States.

There is a bit too much decorum and rigidity in the conventional synagogue presentation to suit my taste, but I have watched youth parade in Nuremberg and on Red Square and I know why my tradition is deeply suspicious of pure emotion and of faith in faith.

The Hebrew word for faith is emunah. Emunah defines an unshakable confidence in life's possibilities and a calm faith in God's redemptive will rather than a surge of mystical feelings. Emunah defines steadfastness on a given course, perseverance. The emphasis is on a whole-hearted service which never doubts that we do the good because God wills us to do the good, or that we will continue on the way because we have faith that God's way is the way we should go. Emunah suggests the special meaning of faith in the Torah tradition.

Christianity's faith in faith relates to its understanding of the psychological obstacles to a happy and honorable existence. The Torah tradition recognizes all the obstacles we face as we try to climb as high as we can on

the ladder of moral sensitivity: our appetites, passions, ambitions, greed, envy. . .; what it does not recognize is a single entity, the hypostasis which Christians call Original Sin, made up of all these natural passions and appetites, an entity which can be overcome by faith. The Christian myth put it this way: when, against God's specific command, Adam and Eve ate of the Tree of Knowledge, they committed a sin whose taint was passed on to all their descendants. Burdened by this Original Sin, no one could gain salvation until God decided that mankind would no longer have to be shackled in this way and brought about a second deliverance. The first was the Exodus, the second God offering the world His son as Christ. All mankind had shared in the sin of Adam, now all could share in the atoning death and be released by faith from the inherited and crippling stigma. Original Sin was defined as thralldom to the devil, being entangled by the libido, being enslaved to lust, ambition, and it was taught that, by faith in the Christ's vicarious sacrifice of Himself, man could break free of these shackles and save his soul from damnation.

The Torah tradition recognized in our makeup each of the elements of Original Sin, and knew how each was an obstacle in the way of our developing what is generally called character; but denied that these obstacles could be removed simply by an act of faith. Faith is simply not that powerful. I have a deep faith in God but I have not resolved all the contradictions of my nature nor have I managed properly all my responsibilities. There is no evidence that right doing is easier for the born-again Christian than for the once-born Christian or the non-Christian.

Jimmy Carter's a case in point.

I let the comment slip by. Our tradition does not encourage the believer to feel that having felt the touch of the Holy Spirit he is saved. Heaven is not reserved for those who have faith but for those who are good. Classic Christianity, with its teaching that only faith in the Cross saves, could not say as did at least some elements in rabbinic Judaism: "The righteous among the peoples of the world have a share in the World to Come."

All of us know Robert Burns' line: "You take the high road and I'll take the low road and I'll be in Scotland afore ye." Christianity took the high road, justification by faith, the promise of a sacramental salvation, an emphasis on motivation rather than community structure and careful self-discipline. We took the low road and worked to create the institutions which would encourage ethical growth and create the basis of a humane social order and the discipline which develop character. Our emphasis was on regimen and discipline rather than impulse. You will find the sages pronouncing: At first do what should be done because it's demanded of you. In time you'll do the right because it's the right thing to do. Character development is a slow process and one which requires concern for the environment in which we live as well as for our habits. The high road may be a more dramatic way but, according to the poet, those who take the low road get there first and, besides, it is from the valley floor that you see the mountains in all their splendor.

Her voice: Until now I never thought about it quite this way but you've touched my problem with Judaism. I want a vision and my rabbi gives me wisdom. I want to dream the impossible dream and he tells me to make sure it's not mission impossible and to make sure I know where I am going. I have always felt Judaism makes too much of the mind. Sometime I can't sleep all night because my mind is whirling so fast. There can be an intellectual as well as an emotional overload.

There can be too much wisdom. My city has paid innumerable experts to prepare urban renewal plans; and the process of making plans and deciding between competitive designs has become a major source of delay. A good case can be made that in recent times elements within the Jewish community undervalued feeling and the power of emotion. I can still remember the surprise of many in my congregation when I gave a course on Jewish mystical techniques: all-night Torah study; fasting from dawn to dusk; midnight vigils and the like. 'I didn't know Jews ever did such things.' Throughout most of the Middle Ages more Kabbalah was studied than Talmud, and in the sixteenth and

seventeenth centuries the spiritual center of Jewish life was the sacred city of Safed where mystics-in-training clustered around learned spirit masters who taught them esoteric techniques and an esoteric wisdom. It was always both mine and spirits. The Bible, like Caesar's Gaul, is divided into three parts and the wisdom literature is only one part of the whole. Another is prophecy where intensity breaks through prudential concerns. Amos was impatient with the concerns of a high priest like Amaziah who argued that nothing should be said which would suggest to people that there were questions about the value of coming to the shrine. Amos mocked Amaziah, but the priest was not simply protecting his turf. To be sure, many priests made their living at Shiloh, but it was equally true that its fund supported widows and orphans and the community's public welfare programs.

I have a friend who worries over each decision so long that he has never gotten his life off dead center.

Your rabbi did not tell you not to go. Abraham was told: Go! Leave your land, your birthplace and your father's house and go to the land that I will show you. No detailed plans or specific directions were offered. Presumably, by faith, Abraham would find his way. But, even as Abraham is given his head, he is also given a warning: "Be a blessing", be careful that what you do will not cause hurt to another but will add to the sum total of happiness, a typically Jewish prescription. The vision splendid with a dash of practical advice.

That's calculation.

Perhaps. Calculation comes in two models. There is the rather mechanical calculating of consequences. Aristotle suggests such a calculus in his discussion of the Golden Mean. Following his mathematics one would try to keep his actions balanced and really never take bold steps; and there is a calculus of possibility which seeks not the middle road but the path which will lead to an unfolding of our spirit and the achievement of a higher level of self-control and sensitivity. Torah-based calculation, at its best, thrusts

deliberately towards an enlarged generosity of spirit, a greater sensitivity and a heightened awareness of our responsibility to others and to God. We must move on in a spirit of mounting aspiration which is what the prophet Hosea meant when he said, "Press on to know God."

The Torah tradition's goal is the sanctification of life. Equal weight is given to the individual's religious life and to the fashioning of a just society. Torah is a revelation which includes specific rules for personal growth, family structure, business relations, a community's social welfare, even public health. Israel is to be "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation". Prophetic outrage at injustice, Amos thundering about the spoiled and callous folk of his day, has always played a role in Israel's program of social regeneration; but so has the less dramatic responsibility of training up a child in the way he should go, creating social welfare institutions of all types, and the disciplining of one's own lusts and greed: "Sanctify yourself and only then seek to sanctify others."

Your way takes too long. Our society needs radical surgery. Prudence and wisdom, what you call halachic discipline, are rationalizations for inaction and the excuses of those who are not willing to be bold.

People of decision and of conviction are among the most blessed and the most dangerous of all human beings. A vision is by definition missionary. It is only natural to want to share what we know to be right with our children and with the world. A missionary offers himself and a redeeming wisdom which is to him a gift without price. Missionaries went to Asia, Latin America and Africa and imposed upon the natives attitudes and values which were often ruinous to the tribe's social and cultural life. They were not paid to do so. Their motives were unselfish. They risked their lives so that others might share God's blessings.

What happens when what you believe stands in the way of what I believe? If my ego is large enough or my convictions uncertain, I try to convert you. If I cannot convince you, you become an obscurantist and I may well be

tempted to devise coercive means of changing your mind. During the Cultural Revolution millions of Chinese were sent to re-education communes. The Russians handle dissidents in what they euphemistically call mental hospitals. Millions have died because someone wrote a book on economic philosophy and that book became for millions a truth uncoupled from that humane wisdom which would interpose restraint.

The virtue of halachic discipline is that it provides a way to rein in the excesses of the committed. Modern there are things that we may not do. We may not murder property owners who stand in the way of a revolution simply because they are in the way. We may not steal another's good name even if he opposes what we consider progress. We may not slander a political opponent even though we know he is unfit for office. The Jew does not say, 'to thine own self be true', but 'know before whom you stand'. The commandments limit the means we can use to fulfill our vision and, in so doing, protect us from ourselves. Patience tempers the dream. Dreams and imagination raise patience above the level of tawdry compromise.

Go! Do! But be careful to be a blessing. Don't let your passions push you out of control.

Jews, too, can be fanatics.

In Israel some Jews stone the cars of those who drive near Mea Shearim on the Sabbath. Jews have censored books, sometimes, to be sure, under coercion; but sometimes simply because authority never likes to be questioned. But it is not easy for Jews to stay at white heat. Our sense of humor gets in the way and the tradition does not encourage unbridled passion. Torah literature vibrates with the requirement of patience. Man is not God. How can we be that sure we are right? When I got hot under the collar my father would say: Hop nicht, don't jump into it; and my mother would add: 'Don't be a hot angel'.

Jews do not make disciplined followers. The Israelites repeatedly murmured against Moses and, later, repeatedly rebelled against their kings.

Golda Meir used to say that she was the only premier with two million presidents. Office does not ennoble the occupant. Rabbis were accorded only that authority which the people felt their erudition and character deserved. When a medieval community wanted an halachic question resolved they circulated the case broadly or else got an answer from a respected sage and submitted that brief to other scholars for comment. Authority lay with a scholarly consensus and not with the opinion of a single man. Even trusted wisdom must be checked out. God alone enjoyed uncontested authority, all other authority was derivative. Checks and balances are in our blood.

I was struck as you spoke of the Torah's ability to handle contradictions constructively.

Some people see every decision as between black and white; they are either/or types. Others see a wide range of possibilities and consequences, many shades of gray. We're both/and people, or at least our tradition encourages us to be, both community and autonomy; both wisdom and imaginative commitment; both mind and spirit. Our motto might well be the rabbinic maxim, "take hold of this thought and do not forget the opposite thought."

We're back to the Golden Mean.

No. Aristotle's world was that of the cool and detached academic. The Torah tradition is committed to holiness. We use reason not to avoid action but to avoid being counterproductive. Our goal is growth not balance.

Chapter 8

JUDAISM IS

After lunch I began with a bit of personal history. Some years back my father studied the distinctions between the Jewish world outlook and that of other philosophies and religions, and titled his manuscript Where Judaism Differs. An editor antiqued the title into Where Judaism Differed, and so it was published. The publisher apparently was motivated by a point of view shared at the time by many of liberal spirit that though there had been major differences between the classic faiths, these were no longer significant. Theology meant little to them and they could not imagine anyone really caring about Calvary or Sinai which they dismissed as colorful legends. Only the ethical teachings of the religions counted and these were assumed to be essentially similar. Theological distinctions bred distance and misunderstanding and it was a progressive act to deny their importance.

That editor misread the times. Since World War II a tidal wave of religious passion has moved across the globe. Who would have believed college women in Iran would encourage the Ayotollah Khomeini to put them back into purdah? Across the Near East immans have preached jihad, holy war, against Israel. Ireland, Lebanon, Iran, India, give the lie to those who still believe that the world has outgrown religious differences; nor is religious passion limited to backward countries or ignorant folk. The Right-To-Life crusade in our country is fueled by church doctrine and led by many who are well-educated. Nor has the house of Israel been exempt. Some of the settlements on the West Bank serve security purposes. Others are there because groups like the Gush Emunim, the self-styled 'faithful', insist that the Bible's description of the boundaries of the Promised Land must determine the foreign policy objectives of the current government.

He was a child of his time and situation. The allies had won the war. America was prosperous and powerful. We seemed to be solving our problem

and, among the academics at least, there was a tendency to see religion as a disembodied and largely irrelevant set of doctrines floating somewhere out there. There was no good reason to get excited about quaint customs or parochial problems. The non-affiliated folk assumed that the old theologies would simply wither away and be replaced by a sensitive ethicism which could recognize and exalt the potentialities of each human being. There was a good bit of talk about a Judeo-Christian tradition, the assumption being that each faith system encouraged the same basic values: moral responsibility, individual dignity, economic and social justice, the brotherhood of man under the Fatherhood of God.

At the same time Socialist theoreticians were identifying religion with other-worldliness and the encouragement of political passivity and, as such, part of the propaganda put out by those who benefited from the injustices of the status quo. Cultural anthropologists had located religion in every known culture and had defined the integrative and enlivening function of religion and, in the process, making it clear that all claims to a monopoly of truth or to sole possession of the keys of the Kingdom were without merit.

Theology tended to be dismissed, without warrant, as little more than skillful apologetics for a particular position rather than as an investigation of truth. Departments of Christian theology became Departments of Religion where study focused on developing a methodology which would permit students to comprehend the function of all religious systems rather than on an examination of the "truth" of one system. There was no "true" religion, only complementary and culturally distinct ways of achieving a coherent and inspiring outlook on life. Such comparative studies and the opening of neutral space in society where religious labels didn't matter, seemed to open the way, finally, to a true human community; and within this frame of reference, particularist concerns could only be seen as quixotic and regressive.

It was a time when people kept reminding me that Confucius, Jesus and Hillel each had taught the Golden Rule: 'do not do unto others what you would not have them do unto you,' from which it presumedly followed as night the day

that everything that needed to be said about religion had been said.

I think it was Jean Paul Sartre who said, "the best way to feel oneself no longer a Jew is to reason." He might equally well have said 'Christian' or 'muslim.' Reason seeks truth and there is no Jewish, Christian or Hindu truth, at least not if we are using truth in an objective sense. Dad's editor considered himself a reasonable man and in his mind it stood to reason that modern thought had voided all claims to theological distinction. This approach did not consider the possibility of Iran's Ayotollah Khomeini, Libya's Quadafi, Ireland's Rev. Paisley, China's cultural revolution or the born-again phenomenon in our own country.

Why was he so wrong?

He shared with many other fine and gentle folk the disadvantage of being an educated, mildly liberal, middle-class white Westerner who, secure in America's power and prosperity, felt confident that his values were right and that they ultimately would be accepted by the rest of the world. There were still witch doctors and faith healers but they belonged to the Third World and the Other America and would disappear as the benefits of learning and prosperity spread.

My father's editor, whom I later got to know, was, in fact, a communicant of an American civic religion which assumes the unquestioned value of democracy, social reform and individual freedom; and bases its vision in the faith, the word is deliberately used, that what is contradictory, erratic or malicious in human action results from societally-induced distortions of our innate decency rather than any inherent limitation of human nature. According to this upbeat humanism, selfish or erratic behavior is the result of the human spirit having been brutalized by the cruelties and dehumanizing institutions of the social order. Presumably, as human institutions are reformed, the amount of psychological damage will diminish and our gentle and loving self will emerge from its ego defenses. This was the religion which provided the impulse, acknowledged or unacknowledged, to utopian communes from America's New

Harmony and Amana to Israel's Degania and Ein Harod.

Do you disagree with the proposition that we are what our society allows us to become?

The rabbis warned against settling in a city where there are no schools. A community's reach augments or limits your own; but not completely. You can stand against the tide: "In a place where there are no men, strive to be a man." The Genesis myth of Sodom and Gemorrah, the wicked cities of the Plain, focuses on Abraham's intercession with God on behalf of any good folk who might have lived there: "will you sweep away the innocent with the guilty?" Not even twenty righteous were to be found, but the point had been made that living in Sodom need not reduce strong-minded people to indecency. Environment isn't everything. Every commune has its failures.

Go back to your editor and his common denominator idea about contemporary religions. Was he so wrong?

Where Judaism Differed was published in 1956 just before ethnic and black studies burst on the scene, and my editor friend misread the times. Blacks, it seemed, wanted to be black, not white. Spanish parents wanted their children taught in their native tongue. Christians wanted to be evangelical, not simply ethical.

Disturbed by the blind impersonality of the mass society, "Here are decent godless people, their only memory the asphalt road and a thousand lost golf balls" (T.S. Eliot), many turned from the struggle to be like to a struggle to separate out. French Canada is a case in point. Everywhere there was a renewed interest in "soul". Some turned to the cults, but far more toward the religious gospels which had provided their ancestors, but not necessarily their parents, with identity, moral certainty and corporate pride. It was the age of the born-again evangelism and Jesus Christ Superstar. It was a time for "tradition". The ghetto was a cold, impoverished and squalid place, full of pathology, but Fiddler on the Roof exposed none of this. Religion was in. But then we began to hear about the Moonies and brainwashing and we began to realize again that religions could not be accorded a blanket certificate of

ethical value.

The editor failed to recognize that holiness never exists in the abstract, but always adheres to a particular rite, holiday or hymn. There is no such thing as an unlabeled human being, everyone must have a name; there is no such thing as an unlabeled religion.

George Santayana is credited with the observation that to try to be religious without espousing a specific religion is like trying to speak without controlling a specific language. Esperanto and ecumenicism belong to those bleached ideas which went out of style at about the time America recognized we would remain a pluralistic society and not a homogenous one. French, Swahili and Japanese are distinct languages and natural expressions of a particular culture. "Catholicism, Shamanism, Shinto and the Torah tradition are distinct religions and natural expressions of a particular religious civilization. There are methodologies which allow us to study the various religions; religions share common social and psychological functions; but identity of function is simply that and no more. America's civic religion and Soviet Communism are opposed diametrically in teaching and messianic hope. The idea that the various religions promulgate the same fundamental attitudes and values is absurd.

Limit yourself to Judaism and Christianity. Aren't they built on the same foundation, the Bible?

Not really. What is Torah to us is Old Testament to them. To Christians the Bible contains important, even inspired, materials, a chronicle of the first stage of sacred history and prophecies about the(Christ) Messiah; but much of it has been cancelled or superseded.

We share the Ten Commandments.

In part. We read, "you shall not murder". They translate, "you shall not kill"; their version fits more closely Jesus' 'turn the other cheek' sermon; but it's an impossible translation since the Torah text permits wars of self-defense and stipulates capital punishment for certain crimes. Behind this example lies a difference in approach. Paul denied the divine authority

of all the six hundred and thirteen commandments in the Torah, so the Ten Commandments could be interpreted as a self-contained unit. To Jews all the Commandments were sacred.

We share the messianic hope of peace on earth.

In part, the Christian vision is of a world joined in faith as the mystic body of Christ; the Jewish vision, growing out of our history, emphasizes Zion, the land, established in justice, and the world rejoicing in justice and peace without necessarily being joined in one religious communion.

Aren't religious differences really limited to official pronouncements? People don't care.

Differences in religion show up in the individual attitudes as well as the church publications. Try a simple test. Ask a few friends whether or not they agree with the sentence: faith is a private matter. I think you will find that most Christians will say 'yes' unequivocally; and most Jews will agree, but quickly add something about the importance of community. There is a much stronger sense of family in the Jewish experience than in the Christian ethos. The Jewish position reflects the palpable sense of Jewish interdependence which operates throughout the Jewish world and leads Jews everywhere to support Israel, welcome Soviet emigres and worry about their co-religionists in South Africa and the Argentine. Jewish communities in every town of size in the United States organize fund-raising drives for caring institutions, religious education and the relief of Jews everywhere under the rubric, 'we are one'. Such support is instinctive among Jews, so much so that we wonder when the Christian world fails to mobilize itself to support the Christians of Lebanon or the Sudan. Jews have been taught by the prophets as well as history that being a Jew involves you with God and with the Jewish people. We expect our leaders to be active in the community and not lead a life of secluded devotions. Moses went back to Egypt to bring out a whole people.

The existence of religious differences does not preclude civic cooperation.

On some issues it does. The Roman Catholic bishop of Cleveland and I have worked closely on race-related matters, particularly desegregation of the schools, but we are on opposite sides of the political fence when it comes to Federal aid to parochial schools and the proposed anti-abortion constitutional amendment. His church takes a more rigid attitude on birth control than rabbinic Judaism and, Certainly, than I do. Elements of the Protestant Church translate the rules of Sabbath rest into Sunday blue laws and argue an absolute pacifism, neither of which is a Jewish position. Concern for churches and communicants in the Arab world has led international church bodies, both Catholic and Protestant, to be less than forthcoming in their pronouncements on Israel. Different clusters of religious ideas lead to different agendas and to different attitudes towards specific social problems.

Christianity glorified celibacy. The Augustinian Church accepted Paul's putdown of marriage as a condescension to the flesh. Judaism labeled marriage kiddushim, a sanctification. Love was a natural and healthy human expression. There was no reason to be ashamed of physical attraction. "Three sights are too wonderful for me, four which I know not: the way of an eagle in the air; the way of a serpent upon a rock; the way of a ship in the midst of the sea; and the way of a man with a young woman." Rabbis always have married. According to folklore, God enjoys working as a marriage broker. A thirteenth-century sage-mystic, Nachmanides, wrote a book which praised the physical relationships between men and women as fulfilling God's creative purpose, not only because sex produced children but because pleasure was given and received. No one found anything unseemly in the suggestion that the frank love lyrics of the Song of Songs at the same time described God's love for Israel.

The Jewish tradition emerged in a Near Eastern cultural environment where the body and the soul were accepted as inseparably intertwined. The Biblical word, nsfesh, denoted both soul and the physical heart. The New Testament emerged in a world deeply influenced by Greek categories of thought

whose tendency was to separate matter and form, body from soul. Form, the soul, was seen as eternal, pure; matter, the flesh as perishable and impure. Having come of age when this dualistic system was dominant, early Christianity came naturally to hold that one of the purposes of religious discipline was to free the soul from its prison within the body. To that end ascetic disciplines such as fasting and the mortification of the flesh were encouraged. Marriage was seen as a condescension to the flesh. Elements of the Jewish people were influenced by this dualism and an ascetic tradition developed; but at no time was monasticism declared the only way to holiness. Moses had a wife, Zipporah, and sons. Jesus was a bachelor.

In the long record which is Jewish history you can locate men who bathed in cold rivers and who fasted to break free from the power of their appetites; but the Torah's unitary understanding of the human being continued to act as a caution not to divide man into parts and declare some parts seemly and others unseemly. Among Jews ascetics coexisted with those who worshipped God with a whole heart and after a good meal, and the community generally was not prepared to declare one way superior.

Aren't there differences of similar magnitude between orthodox and other Jews on a range of matters, from the separation of church and state to cremation? The tradition defines homosexuality as a sin. The Reform movement organizes a gay synagogue. The tradition requires ground burial but some congregational cemeteries include mausoleums and niches for ashes. How can Torah be such a mishmash?

We live at a time when the river we call Jewish life is plunging through white water rapids and significant differences have developed among those who are serious about the Torah tradition on how responsibly to come to grips with changing conditions. Some emphasize the letter of the law, others its spirit; and both groups can make a case for their position. Take the matter of homosexuality. The rabbinic tradition emphasizes that the Torah condemns homosexual acts; the liberal tradition cites the Torah texts which prohibit treating anyone as a misfit or outcast. Our choice of a position will depend

on which theme we give the greater weight, our gut feeling about the advisability of change, whether we think in terms of the river or the tree. Here lies the great divide in modern Jewish life. The halacha permits abortion only when there is a direct threat to the mother's life, but also affirms that the holiness of life involves concerns about the quality of life. There are differences, and they are basic; but, as long as we choose to think seriously about Torah values, our conclusions are whether the tradition and there is reason to believe that as we learn to live in our new world greater agreement will emerge. The more flexible force the Formalists to consider whether circumstances have changed so much that people are being hurt rather than helped by the regimen Torah suggests and the Formalists force those of liberal spirit to examine their positions more carefully. I have noticed this particularly in the great abortion debate where liberals no longer dismiss out of hand criticisms of abortion justified as a birth control technique or suggestions of the emotional bit of an abortion.

Why did the rabbinic teaching limit abortions rather tightly while many of us take a different position?

Medical advances have changed the context in which such a decision must be made. Halachic norms were set up at a time when surgery was primitive, dangerous and attempted only when there were no alternatives and towards term. Abortion in our time is a safe surgical procedure best carried out during the first trimester of pregnancy. Their world was underpopulated and fertility was a constant problem. Our world is overpopulated and the human species does not have to be encouraged "to be fruitful and multiply." Their issue was which life: the mother's or the baby's. Our issue is whether to deliver a malformed or unwanted baby. No one can be comfortable with a cavalier attitude towards the taking of life or potential life; good Jews will disagree on the abortion issue, but the sensitivity of our disagreement testifies to the range of Torahic concerns and the familiar emphasis on the consequences of moral judgment.

How much weight should we give to the old ways?

I can answer only for myself. I try to remain open to traditional ways, a hundred generations of moral sensitivity should not be cavalierly dismissed nor should they be slavishly followed. My rule is to break with the past only when the older forms restrict the possibility of holy living in the present by not comprehending the circumstances of modern life. I pay little attention to old rules such as the one which forced a wife to remain technically married if her husband had disappeared or if no witness could be found to his death. I respect the sanctity of marriage, but modern communication makes the survival of missing travelers unlikely in the extreme and minimizes the possibility that twenty years later, unless he has deliberately tried to run away, and then the wife surely is better off married to another. The area of women's rights is perhaps the one where I break most often with the old ways. I do not consider the fact that the pronouns in the Torah text are of the male case reason sufficient to deny to a woman the right to initiate divorce proceedings or to offer testimony in court.

I cannot overstate the argument that being Jewish is not an unnecessary add-on to the task of becoming a good human being but an essential prerequisite. I can't be truly human if I lack a compelling vision of life's coherence, a religion, and the Torah tradition is one such vision and one with a remarkably good track record. Where it had once been chic to disparage the dietary laws as outdated public health measures and mock the tallit and tefillim as peculiar prayer uniforms; in recent years social scientists have studied the psychological and societal function of ritual and reported on the importance of familiar ritual for mental health. Ritual is in. Bar and Bat Mitzvahs, Selihot services, Afruf have reappeared in old-line liberal congregations where once decorum and a sermon comprised the liturgy, and guitar evangelism is not unknown in traditional synagogues. The pendulum has swung so far some of us are concerned that the religious life may become a form of idolatry for some, an end in itself, and that they will neglect the parallel emphasis

on learning and social justice. Fortunately, one of the grand things about this ancient and rich tradition is that it survives cultural fads because it is so many sided and contains wisdom relevant to all sides of life's contradictions. Ultimately, the forgotten themes are picked up. Ancient Israel had its priests who ministered colorfully at the altar, scribes who taught the prudential wisdom literature to the court and prophets who questioned both prudence and wisdom in the name of hesed, an uncompromising covenant loyalty.

I went on a bit in this way when a young woman who until this point had sat quietly stopped me in my tracks: "So what?" She allowed that my discussion was fairly accurate, but what had this to do with her and her friends? "History is over. Paul, Augustine and Nachmanides are long dead." She and her friends, Christian and Jewish, live in a liberated society, take their advice on sex and marriage from professional counselors and neither know nor care what their respective traditions teach. "Indeed", she added, "my rabbi tends to equivocate but, when all is said and done, he believes the new morality is generally healthy and I doubt he could base his view on the Torah."

She was right - from her perspective. Most young Jews and Christians go to the same schools, read the same books, play the same sports, watch the same programs on television, think the same way about pre-marital sex and politics and read the same experts on human development. In this most personal of all areas the old traditions seem to be honored in the breach. More Jews read Dear Abbey than Nachmanides. Probably the only Torah commandment dealing with sex and marriage which is fully observed is the one which prohibits incest.

If this is so, isn't all talk about Jewish identity pointless? Christopher may get his presents on Hanukkah and Samuel on Christmas, but both asked for and will receive the same popular record albums. There is a good chance that Christopher does not know the Christological base of his name or care, and that he will fall in love with Samuel's sister, not only because

she is attractive but because they share common interests and "speak the same language". There are ritual differences but on the human level, where it counts, aren't most young Jews and Christians cut of the same cloth?

We're humans all, but never underestimate the power of conditioning and environment.

I can see the impact of the secular environment but not the impact of the Torah tradition.

On some Torah may have little impact, a label is only a label though, as we have seen, the impact of home and environment is often quite apparent even when we are unconscious of it. All those Jewish activists at Selma and in the Anti-War Movement may not have gone to religious schools but something of the Jewish ethos had gotten through. I remember an early seventies demonstration in front of the Administration Building of the university where I teach. I was skirting the crowd on my way to lecture when a student I knew accosted me and berated me for holding classes: 'You should be here, this is what Judaism is all about.' She was wrong. That particular noise was more adolescent rage than prophetic outrage; but we're back to the instinctive recognition that the Torah tradition is a way of life and not simply a way to organize synagogue life.

Back, please, to her comment on the new morality.

The issue is one of attitude and approach and not the purely formal question of whether we should continue our grandparents' approach.

Young People live together openly before or without marriage. Aging parents are placed in homes rather than brought into the home. Women work and men look well to the ways of their household. Parental authority is a sometime thing. My question is always whether these changes are being made to adjust standards of loyalty, responsibility and honest feeling to an open and mobile society a situation which has never existed before, or for less honorable and more hedonistic reasons? Careless sex is simply careless and what is euphemistically called an open marriage is not a marriage. In such

cases the term, new morality, is simply a cover for the old immoralities; but, clearly, new ways must be found to support family ties, bind close the ties of love, see to it that each child is a wanted child, and bring dignity to age. The older family had an authoritarian base. In a world where women have finally emerged as persons partnership marriages and concepts of shared parenting are surely appropriate. With the disappearance of the extended family and the fact that both husband and wife may need to work or want to work, it may no longer be possible to care for aged parents in homes where there are neither rooms nor maiden aunts to act as housekeepers. The older forms are not the only ways to be "holy". Kiddushim implies an unshakable concern for the sanctity of human relationships, not a requirement that our homes and marriages duplicate those of our parents. The new morality is not the first major challenge to "Jewish" family norms. The nobility of Judea maintained harems. Polygamy remained the accepted practice among Oriental and North African Jews until quite recently. Why not? It was the accepted way in Biblical times and the custom in the Muslim environment of the Sephardic communities whose hachanim had no trouble seeing Kiddushim, sanctity, in the better managed plural marriages.

The tradition's stance on moral issues seems vague and undefined.

Really not. There is a broad consensus in such areas as the sanctity of family, respect of persons, race relations, the well-cultivated mind, compassion, sensitivity and empathy, peace, man's careful stewardship of God's gift of life and the good earth.

When I was in Israel there were pickets at a Jerusalem hospital which was performing autopsies. The orthodox will not permit Reform and Conservative rabbis to officiate at weddings and impose restrictions on everything from abortion to divorce which liberal Jews find galling. How can you talk of a Torah consensus?

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Threatened by a changeful world they did not make and do not comprehend, some have retreated into a defensive shell made up of the forms of the past.

Unfortunately, their shell has hardened over time to the point where little of the enlivening spirit of the Torah manages to express itself. The more the world changes the tighter they become. Judaism must not be judged by its relics any more than orthodoxy in Israel must not be judged by a politicized rabbinate.

The Torah contains the fixed and the dynamic, both commandment and debate. The book of Leviticus mandates a rich and complex sacrificial code. Amos and Isaiah doubted the efficacy of the shrine and of sacrifices. The book of Ruth clearly accepts the normalcy, if not the fitness, of intermarriage. Ruth is made the direct ancestor of King David. Ezra ordered those Jerusalemites who had taken non-Judean wives to put them away. Clearly, he felt intermarriage to be a sin. The rabbinic schools of Hillel and Shammai debated several dozen issues over several decades. The Torah is one, yet everyone who confronts its teachings has his own circumstances, mind and needs. We come from many backgrounds and, inevitably, have different understandings. Nor is this a modern sentiment. In several places the Talmud says simply, "both this opinion and the other [quite different] opinion are the words of the living God." Yet, the bonds of Torah and peoplehood keep us one.

I would like Judaism better if there were fewer options. It would be nice if all you had to do was look up a handbook.

I doubt it. Didn't you complain when your parents imposed rules and a curfew? The need to work things out for ourselves is the price of freedom, the right to be responsible for our actions, which means that we have to work harder at both religion and morality. That's why your rabbi makes so much noise about learning and adult education. You can't apply the themes and value set of the Torah tradition if you don't understand it.

What holds so disparate a community together?

I'm still puzzled. You're describing a religious teaching which includes contradictions and strong differences of opinion. That's a hard concept.

I know, but life is full of contradictions and of change. So it has ever been. I have cited the evidence. Why should differences disappear in our day?

Accepting what you say, what holds people of such differing opinions together? Principles and pressure. We are a community of faith because we are a community of fate, and a community of fate because the faith remains compelling. We are a community because we choose to be.



Chapter 9

BUT I DON'T BELIEVE IN GOD

My problem is that the synagogue is a place for believers and I'm not sure I believe in God. It was the first time God had come up.

You do not sign articles of faith when you join a congregation. Any Jew may join. Before we begin the Kol Nidre service on Yom Kippur there is a ritual which goes back to the bad days when many Jews were forced to accept baptism as the only alternative to death. As you can imagine, those who became Christians were not whole-hearted, and on this holiest of days many yearned to worship in the familiar way; so a formula was introduced at the beginning of the service which said simply: we give permission for the service to take place even though there are apostates among us. Synagogue rolls are open to all who care about the Torah tradition and the Jewish people.

Originally, the synagogue was a beit an, simply a local center where meeting, study and worship took place. After the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple the synagogue became, for the first time, a sanctuary as well as a meeting place. Rites like the blowing of the shofar and the blessing of the lulav and ethrog, once limited to The Temple, were transferred to the synagogue whose "holiness" was heightened. Yet, the synagogue never lost its original popular and informal character. In The Temple there were fences which kept non-Jews at a distance from the inner courts. The synagogue has no fences or Keep Out signs: "let all who are thirsty come and drink".

To be sure, the synagogue openly espouses a personal God. Life is not a chance chemical explosion or a hapless, hopeless passage from cradle to crypt; purpose and promise are implicit in creation. God is the Guarantor that it all has meaning. Every worship service includes the Shema, a public affirmation of God's existence, oneness and accessibility. Still, no one is denied entrance if they have doubts or escorted out if they cannot affirm. Caught up as we all are in an age of uncertainty, synagogue membership reflects

our heterogeneity, respects our doubts, but does not make peace with them.

Why would a non-believer come?

Some who are agnostic are nevertheless deeply committed to many of the Torah's values, find satisfaction in observing the holidays and life-cycle customs and are deeply committed to the Jewish people.

Why accept them?

There is always value to be drawn from exposure to our historic culture.

But I feel a hypocrite when I am in a synagogue.

A hypocrite puts on a false face and plays a role designed to delude someone. When we enter a synagogue no one takes the roll and no one stands to gain except ourselves. We come in search, if we do not come in faith; and there is nothing hypocritical in admitting that simple fact.

Each year I spend a great deal of time discussing the essentials of the Torah tradition with my Confirmation class. I explain as much as can be explained of our concept of God, prayer and holiness. I tell these fourteen and fifteen-year olds how Moses was revolted by the gross sexuality and the morbidity of Egyptian paganism; how the Jewish people came to the inspired vision of the one universal God; how all images, statues, and idols, indeed all representations of God, ultimately were purged; how the prophets insisted on a religion of works, not words; and how belief in the one God encouraged the vision of humanity which the Israelites were the first to hold. "Have we not all one Father? Has not one God created us all?"

I discuss with them some of the medieval philosophizing concerning God and His attributes; what we can know about God and what remains forever unknown; and I describe the ways in which modern thinkers discuss the existence of God. However, once I have described, defined and explained, much remains for I am a rabbi, not an historian of religion, and this is a Confirmation class, not a course in comparative religions. I am less concerned with what was once believed as with what these students believe; and so we spend much time talking over their philosophies, not as grand or as ordered perhaps as those of Philo,

Maimonides or Spinoza, but, their own, honest.

Fourteen-year olds remind me of butterflies beginning to shake off the restricting cocoon. They have outgrown the protective but circumscribed world in which they were nurtured, they are emerging into a new world; but it is an unfamiliar world and their movements often seem awkward, even contorted. Experience has shown that the God of the nursery, part guardian angel, part doting grandfather, must be left behind with old toys and a favorite Teddy Bear. One had told a lie and had not been caught. One had prayed to God during her grandmother's illness and the grandmother died. An athlete was even able to tell me the exact hour and day on which he began to doubt. I still remember that date and time, seven p.m., November 12, 1977. He was in Junior High School at the time. He had an afternoon paper route. He was also captain of an intramural basketball team. Late one school day, an important game was unexpectedly rescheduled. The weather was bad and the boy was unable to bribe or cajole any friend to carry the route for him. In his distress he entered a phone booth, closed the door and offered God a heartfelt prayer. "Dear God, I must play this game; let none of my customers complain to the circulation manager. Please let me get away this once with not delivering my papers." At seven p.m. the telephone rang. It was the Circulation Manager. Customers had complained that they had not received their evening paper. During pre-adolescence we trust; we test; and, if God fails the test, we reject.

One year I asked a class to set down as honestly as they could what they believed about God. I asked them not to write what they thought I wanted to read. They didn't. I had brought along several of these paragraphs which I shared with the group.

This grim world really scares me. Every once in a while I realize the cruelty and insensibility of it and that's when I begin to wonder. We can't just be here to disagree, fight, and eventually blow ourselves to bits. There must be some purpose or reason behind us. That is when I

think of God. This ideal is, in a measure, a crutch to lean on. It gives me some hope for the future. I believe I have outgrown the 'old man in the sky watching over me' type of feeling though I can't really describe what has replaced it. Sometimes I can't really accept God, sacrilegious as it may seem, but I might as well be honest about it - probably because the abstract concept is over my head. When I look around and see the hatred and ugliness, I don't understand how God could allow it. The closest I can come, from my experience, is conscience as that part of us which is created in God's image.

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

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

new idea as to what controls us - an idea which will be able to be expressed in mathematical symbols. I also believe that too many people have looked for an easy out to the whole question of life and death and origin and end and have simply attached the tag of 'God' to it all.

Something much more complex, in my opinion, is the answer.

Did you confirm these three despite their doubts?

Certainly. Remember Tennyson: "There is more faith in honest doubt than in half your creeds." Their spirits are alive. Moreover, a Jew is a Jew is a Jew. These are open and searching spirits, not professional doubting Thomases.

I prize these papers. I prize them because they reveal a capacity for conceptual thinking and self-analysis rare even in the adult. Remember, these are fourteen-year olds, not collegians. What a tragedy that school systems often feed intellectual pabulum to such minds as these.

I prize these papers because they represent a questing, a puzzling out, and a grasping for. They are the products of minds in search - in search of meaning, in search of values - and that is, after all, an essential religious activity. We are not born believers. Religious certainty does not come without effort and soul-searching. If faith were simply a matter of affirming a self-evident bit of reasoning then doubt would be an act of arrogance; but, since Immanuel Kant proved that the conventional demonstrations of God's existence all had holes in them, we have been forced to acknowledge that the openness of the synagogue was a tribute to our people's sensitive understanding of the human condition.

For the child faith precedes doubt. For the adolescent doubt precedes maturity and a mature faith. In my experience most believers and agnostics are not far apart. The honest believer acknowledges that he has moments of doubt. The honest agnostic acknowledges that there are moments when he has been awed by nature and sensed a purpose to life. Both seek to grasp the elusive mystery which lies behind the surface of things.

in our teachings. Every step necessarily involves the

A collegian came to visit a while back. God meant a great deal to him and he wanted to know more about the rabbinate as a profession. I happened to have these papers on my desk and I asked him to read several. He read with attention and with increasing puzzlement: "How can you confirm these young people? Read this." He handed me this paragraph:

I have been brought up on respect for God through prayer. The many morals and standards of our religion greatly influence my life. I believe in living a good moral life as taught by my religion and parents, but I think that religion, not God so much, seems to affect my life at present. To me God is an abstract word to whom we pray and about whom I am not sure what I believe, since I haven't spent much time thinking about it up to now and I think I can wait before making any final decision. I believe in the moral codes as guides in leading a fine life and religion is a good teacher of this, but God to me is something apart. I plan to wait so that I can better understand myself before reaching any conclusions about Him.

I asked my true believer to define a religious person. "A religious person is one who believes in God." "Have you never had doubts and questions?" "Certainly, but I now have faith." "Were you certain as an adolescent, always certain?" "No." "Were you confirmed?" "Yes." "Let your ears hear what your mouth has said." Confirmation is a stage in one's Jewish growth, not a public testimony to the fullness of one's faith. The affirmation we ask on Confirmation Day is a pledge of continuing effort: "With all my heart, soul and might I will strive to fulfill the holy purposes of Judaism", rather than an assent to doctrine.

Jews are never commanded to take a loyalty oath to God. There is no signing ceremony when we place before would-be confirmands a many-paragraphed statement of religious principles and say, 'subscribe'. We are encouraged to "seek Me and live." The first step is to feel you belong within the community and only then do we ask you to open your hearts to the possibilities implicit in our teachings. Every step necessarily involves search. If we search we

will find. If we do not find God we may sense something of the mysterious divinity which operates in life.

I have no trouble with God as Creator. I remember a cartoon I saw of a group of monks in the Southwest looking out along the mesa towards a beautiful sunset and calling out: "Author, author." The wonder that is nature could not be simply the result of a chemical accident; but I have never understood why the Torah tradition makes such a to-do about God's Oneness.

An early eighteenth century New England Catechism included the couplet: "How odd that God the Jews should choose?" A good New England divine wanted the world to know that, had he been God, he would have nominated a more appropriate group as his standard bearer. This Yankee might have been surprised had he known that the rabbis had puzzled the same oddity. How was it that among all the mighty empires of the world little Israel was chosen? One suggestion was that God did not wish His law of truth and His law of peace to be imposed by conquest or by coercion, so He chose the least and the smallest.

From time to time I have twisted the words of this doggerel into a different theme: How odd the Jews one God should choose. Twice each day in Biblical times men stopped their work and spoke the simple watchword of our people, "God is, and God is One." The Shema often is written in the design above our ark. It is the climactic affirmation of our worship of Yom Kippur and the final affirmation spoken by the Jew before he dies. Monotheism, the belief in the one God, or at least belief in the unity of all that is, seems to us almost an inevitable idea since it is shared by the major faiths of Western civilization and seems to be confirmed by our science which insists that there are overarching, natural laws which bind all that is together. Perhaps the greatest scientist of our century, Albert Einstein, put the modern view this way: "The scientist's religious feeling takes the form of a rapturous amazement at the harmony of natural law which reveals an intelligence of such superiority that, compared with it, all the systematic thinking and acting of human beings is an utterly insignificant reflection."

Monotheism may seem natural to us. It was not to our ancestors. The world they knew was made up of distinct and separate parts. The moon moved across the night sky and was replaced in the morning by the sun which moved in a different orbit. The wind rose and blew and no man knew from where it came. Streams bubbled up from seemingly bottomless sources. Each element in nature was distinctive and appeared self-actuating. During the Bronze Age the activity of nature could be explained only by assuming an in-dwelling spirit or god in each element directing its destiny. Polytheism seemed natural to the ancient Middle East.

The pagan had no concept of humanity. Their myths declared each people to be descendants of a special protector and, in certain ways, different from and better than other peoples. There were Greeks and lesser breeds without the law. Each pantheon had a high god who was that country's protector. When a country was beaten the conquerors decapitated or defaced the protector's images and raised up their own. The concept of humanity implicit in the Biblical verse, "Have we not all one father? Has not one God created us all", could emerge only among a people long accustomed to monotheism. If God is one and His reach is world-wide, all peoples are His creatures and there are no people over whom God's control does not extend. The Biblical god is the god of Ethiopians and the Persians as well as the Jews. His fate does not rise and fall with the nation's political fortunes; indeed, one of the accomplishments of the prophets was to recognize that a nation's fortunes did not depend on the power of their god but on the quality of the natural life or, in Israel's case, on faithfulness to the terms of the Sinai covenant. Pagan myths depicted ceaseless struggle among the gods and among the nations until the empire whose god was most powerful god conquered all. The Biblical myth depicted God as caring for all peoples. Its vision was not of victorious armies but of international peace, the image of every man sitting under his vine and under his fig tree with none to make him afraid.

Israel's affirmation of God's oneness brought about a revolution in

human thought by introducing a welcome measure of balance to ethical discussion. In the ancient myths each of the gods was endowed with specific virtues or qualities. There was a god of love, another of war, another of wisdom. There was a god of life and there was a god of the Kingdom of the Dead. Each god encouraged his communicants to shape their lives around his attribute; but, as Aristotle observed in his Ethics, any virtue taken to excess becomes a vice. The Egyptians so centered their worship on death that they literally buried all that might have guaranteed the nation a prosperous future and lifted the burden of slavery and abjectness from the mass of their people. Israel's God was not only one, beyond any single attribution, but Jewish: that is, perceived as both just and gracious.

How can God be Jewish?

Every theistic religion emphasizes certain perceptions of God. The Jewish God was known by His actions which were accepted as ultimately moral and right. When the Torah is taken out from the ark the service calls for a recitation of God's attributes as those are phrased in the Torah: "The Lord, the Lord God is merciful and gracious, long-suffering and abundant in goodness and ever true, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity, transgression and sin. The Jewish God was more than mysterious power. He was the model of moral perfection and the consummate duty of the Jew was to pattern himself after God and after examples of God's activity which are reported in Torah. God had clothed the nakedness of Adam and Eve; visited Abraham while he was recovering from surgery (circumcision); comforted Isaac after the death of his father; so, "After the Lord Your God shall you walk."

How did it happen that our fathers made the conceptual leap from idolatry to monotheism?

We can only speculate. Some have tried to explain "the Lord is one" as an insight born of living on the edge of empty wilderness. The Hebrews were sheep-herding tribes who lived in the open land between the Canaanite cities and the desert and so nothing stood between them and the sun, the

storm and the sweep of the earth; presumably, daily experience with the on-rolling cycles of nature sensitized them to the One behind all discrete phenomena. This argument is highly dramatic, but does not explain why, of all the bedouins, only the Hebrews outgrew a polydemonistic and polytheistic mindset and came to an understanding of a single creative principle.

Others reverse the argument and explain monotheism as an insight born of living on the edge of civilization. As desert folk we watched with detached amusement as we saw one country or city-state conquer another and destroy the gods of the vanquished or reduce them to a subordinate place in their pantheon; in turn, to be defeated and have their God rudely treated. According to this theory, the endless rise and fall of imperial gods led our fathers to seek the unity behind the tomfoolery. This explanation again fails to explain why only the Israelites saw the foolishness of all this.

Some historians argue that monotheism was borrowed from the Egyptians. Our fathers happened to be in Egypt during a wrenching dynastic struggle when Pharaoh Akhenaton [14c] set out to destroy the power of the priestly elite by raising the solar disk, Aton, as god above all the other deities of Egypt. His Hebrew slaves presumably knew of these events and Moses skillfully built on Akhenaton's idea and after the Exodus dedicated his people to a single God, all-powerful, all-embracing, a One. Among the problems with this theory is that no one is certain if Akhenaton's activity was theological as well as political; nor are we certain that Moses' perception of God was monotheistic. Certainly monotheism did not become widespread until some centuries after his death.

I believe the explanation lies closer to the Bible's simple statement that God revealed His essence, His Oneness, to Moses. Frankly, we have no better explanation. When Israel was still young, a man, it may have been Moses the prophet, we know not exactly who, found a commanding voice speaking to him and reached out with his mind into the darkness and wrenched from the darkness the vision of the one God. Science did not demand it, indeed,

science argued against it. Reason did not demand it, indeed, reasonable men, including the best minds of the next thousand years, argued against it; but, somehow, our fathers reached out and understood.

You don't actually believe that Moses went up on Sinai and that God spoke to him there?

Sinai is part of a dramatic myth which like all truly significant myths is truer than if it were literally true. Sometimes when I puzzle over a problem the answer comes when I least expect it, often when I am thinking of something else. I believe that Moses, or another, puzzled over the incongruities of idolatry and suddenly a new understanding of the creative and mysterious reality behind the world of things and appearances fell into shape. I believe in radical surprise which is what I believe is meant by revelation.

Franz Rosenzweig suggested some years ago that the Torah's redundant language describing Sinai, "and God came down and God spoke", was carefully chosen and not simply the result of the oriental love of piling on phrases. "God came down", he said, concludes the revelation; "God spoke" begins Moses' interpretation. The miracle is that God, meaning, presented itself; once it is present a human mind appropriates the idea and expresses it as best it can.

The ancients did not actually worship sticks or statues, but a complex and coherent world of powers represented by their idols which resided in nature. Open an acorn and you will not find a miniature oak tree. How else then account for the tree's emergence but by the postulate of an indwelling God Who makes the tree grow in just that way. The sun makes a daily circuit of the heavens, disappears and reappears in the east each dawn. Yet, physical objects do not move themselves. How else account for its movement except by some such myth as that of Apollo and his chariot? We sense pattern and order in nature, but we also experience nature's unexpected violence: the lightning bolt, the flood, the overpowering heat of the sun, so it was only natural to assume that the gods were not only numerous but unpredictable and that the appropriate worship of such gods should involve not only reverence.

and an attempt to entice, bribe these powers not to do us harm and, if possible, to do what we ask of them. Polytheism focuses on the shrine. Monotheism enables the Torah to give priority to acts of holy living which are not shrine-centered or ceremonial.

Ancient men worshipped their gods at various shrines. Since the gods were related to visible objects it was only natural to believe that the god actually lived there. At the shrine particular rites were performed by appointed priests for the purpose of placating the god's anger or gaining his favor. The Hebrews, too, had their shrines. It would be centuries before they would outgrow the edifice complex, if they ever really did; but beginning in the eighth century B.C.E. prophets emerged who taught the people that "the whole earth is full of His glory" and that shrine activity never was meant to be the sole focus of the religious life. The focus of the religious life was to become a holy community; and holiness, be it remembered, always was defined in active ethical terms.

Monotheism raised God above nature. "In the beginning God created." Man was not subservient to the unpredictable forces of nature but covenanted to the creator God Who, according to Genesis, had given man power to subdue the animal kingdom and to use nature. This shift in perspective increased man's self-assurance and sense of worth. It also set the stage for science. Pagan gods cannot be investigated; their actions were autonomous and therefore unpredictable; but, if nature is distinct from God, not God but object, then our minds can investigate its furthest reaches.

The pagan world worshipped its gods and feared them. Their gods, like humans were caught up in private plans and conflicts, the Trojan War started over a Heavenly beauty contest, and the activities and whims of the gods often turned out to be harmful to men and nations. You never knew what a god would do so your relationship to God was more that of courtier to tyrant than son to loving father. "And you shall love the lord your God" was a new thought which germinated among those who no longer equated nature's unpredictability with the activities of the various gods. It was a pregnant idea which described

a new state of mind which could begin to conceive and shape worship as thanks-speaking rather than as bribery, the sacrifices.

The ancients saw themselves as pawns and playthings of their gods. The pagan felt himself powerless against Fate. The vision of God as one permitted men to consider the possibility that they had some control over their lives, God rewards the good and punishes the evil, and a major goal of life becomes the building of a moral record which deserves reward. The Hebrew felt that you get what you deserve. The Torah tradition theme of moral accountability is emphasized in every way possible. The liturgy of both Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur is shaped on the myth of an annual assize during which our individual lives, and that of the whole people, are reviewed by the Supreme Judge. This myth is refracted throughout these services, never more pointedly or poignantly than in a medieval prayer known as the Unetaneh Tokef: "Let us declare the utter holiness of this day for it is one of awe and dread. . .truly you are judge, accuser and all-knowing witness, you write and seal, record and number, remember all things that have been forgotten, open the book of remembrances wherein each deed speaks of itself. Overhead a great shofar is sounded, the angels join in fear and cry out: 'Behold the day of judgment'." The idea that each of us is being constantly judged is a dominant and recurrent theme in the Torah tradition; but God is merciful as well as strict. He will weigh our intentions as well as our deeds, and there is always a second chance. "Repentance, prayer and righteousness can avert the severe decree."

If all have one father, God values equally the various labors we each do. Most societies characterize certain tasks as noble and others as demeaning. Physical labor, particularly, was held to be low-class. The middle-class in America still has trouble with a child who wants to become a factory worker. The landed gentry held merchants in disrepute. In ancient times nobles entered a Temple by one door, commoners by another. The Torah tradition was a scholarly tradition, yet, no attempt was made to disguise the fact that some of the sages earned their living as shoemakers, smiths and craftsmen. The theory was that "the study of the Torah is excellent if it is combined

with a worldly occupation for this combined effort puts sin out of mind", but it was equally true that labor without learning reduced man to the level of a pack animal.

~~Hold up~~ Hold up. If God is One where do all the angels and spirits of some of the hymns and the folk tales come from? I've been reading I.B. Singer and his stories are full of such folk. Are we really monotheists?

Yes and no. The faith has proclaimed consistently that God has dominion over all that is seen and unseen. Satan in the Job story is not an independent power but an angel in God's court who must ask God's permission to test Job. But it is true that over the centuries many cast spells against the wee folk and many tales were told about them. The oneness of God is a concept which it is hard for the mind to grasp. How do you envision what cannot be seen, touched or described? Life is full of premonitions which we do not fully understand and unexpected experiences; moreover, before medicine discovered germs and viruses, how else was disease to be explained? The theory was that the panoply of Heaven did God's will, but official theology was often compromised by credulity.

Angels and wee folk of the night are superstitions.

True, but before you feel too superior remember that yours is the Age of Aquarius.

But I'm not superstitious.

Then why are you wearing a Hai emblem around your neck?

That's simply my identification as a Jew.

Perhaps, but why do you feel naked and unprotected without it?

Enough. I've got another question. Why did our ancestors take axes to Canaan's idols? Today collectors pay thousands of dollars for those statues. They're quite beautiful. Nor do we go around knocking other people's religions.

In ancient Israel there was no National Conference of Idolators and Jews. With idolatry there was to be no accommodation. "Obliterate the foreign gods that are in your midst." The high places must be torn down and ploughed

under. The sacred groves must be cut down and the wood used for fuel. The foreign gods were mocked. They were vanity, nothingness, shameful and worse. Idolatry equated the gods and power. The Torah tradition equated God and good. Since idolatry supported indecency, injustice, the separation of races, its worship must be swept away. When Moses asks to see God he is told, "You cannot see My face, but I will make My glory pass behind you." In what did God's glory consist? I am the Lord, a god of mercy and a god of righteousness, justice, decency and maturity.

All that's history. Idolatry died with the pagan world. No one makes idols.

Don't they? What are those plastic figures I see on car dashboards? Innocent, you say? Perhaps, unless the driver is convinced that because they are there he can floor the accelerator pedal without danger.

You'll admit you're stretching a point.

Most of our idols are invisible but nonetheless real. There is the idol named pride of birth and another pride of place. There is the deity of the white skin and the deity of color. What of the patron god of the self-righteous nation? We are scandalized that the ancients should offer human sacrifice. I put to you that each decade or so we offer a holocaust of our best and brightest to the god of national ambition, or is it the god of national greed?

Idolatry dethrones God and enthrones some human passion or interest in His place. The Communists' idol is the ideology they call "scientific Marxism", and those who argue for the untrammelled freedom of the marketplace have an idol called capitalism. All ideologies which ascribe infallibility to a set of human ideas are idolatries.

Do we not project into the heavens a rather indulgent deity who forgives us for our foibles, applauds us vigorously for our trivial accomplishments, encourages us in our low moments and who is careful not to reprimand us for enjoying leisure and security without thought to the needs of others?

We hypostatize our prejudices and our privileges, and our alter ego god assures us that our position is merited and that the less fortunate are less able. Who of us has not been tempted to love excessively a parent, a cause, a possession, a charismatic leader, a party, the State? The Israelites would have been surprised to hear some of their later descendants argue, 'it matters not what you believe as long as you do believe.' It matters what you believe. Good will needs a bit on rethinking. When I recite the Shema I am reminded forcefully that there is only one love which cannot be excessive and that all other commitments must be conditional.

If you worshipped the great Fire god, Malo, your worship consisted of having a son or daughter walk across burning coals into the raging maw of this monstrous god. Is there any greater outrage than child sacrifice? In the Torah tradition the proper sacrifice is the humble and contrite heart. If you belonged to one of the fertility cults of Canaan you worshipped at a shrine where the earth's fertility was stimulated by orgiastic rite designed as a form of sympathetic magic to impregnate the earth even as the worshipper impregnated the shrine's female attendants. In the Torah tradition the earth's fertility had little to do with shrine activity. "If you are willing and obedient, you shall eat the good of the land; but if you refuse and rebel you shall be devoured by the sword."

It still matters whether you worship the high priest of the master race and shout, "Zeig Heil" instead of "Amen." The worship of a master race leads to war, to the grinding down of the poor and the weak under the iron boot; the only wars which the worship of the one God encouraged are the wars against want, injustice and man's cruelty to his neighbor.

The Kamikazi pilot believed and believed deeply. The Ku klux Klansman believes and believes deeply. There are churches in our country that have created a god of whiteness. Belief simply defines commitment to a vision. What if you are attached to a base vision or a corrupt hope? Outrageous beliefs lead to outrageous actions. Belief is not necessarily a virtue.

With people of high-minded theologies, we smile, we welcome, and we exchange. Idolatry separated man from man, city from city, nation from nation. If Ra, the great god of Egypt, created man, the Egyptian was created first and belonged to a master race! All other peoples were the creation, so the myths had it, of the concubines of the gods, consequently a lesser breed. Idolatry consecrated the separation of men into city-states, nations and races, and failed to provide them a unifying vision which would raise humanity's needs above the group's special needs. Racism grows rapidly in the soil of idolatry. So do the rationalizations which justify slavery and caste. When the emperor of Assyria made known Marduk's law, he announced a rule which protected the persons and privileges of the nobility far more than those of the peasant and lower castes, and the slave had no protection at all. If a slave was murdered by a free man his marked value was paid to his owner as restitution and there was no charge of murder. Idolatry precludes the notion of a single humanity; the oneness of God requires it; one creator, one world; one humanity; one moral law for all.

Chapter 10

THE GOD WHO LETS US CRY

Late at night. It was the oldtimer's bunk and turn. Coffee, a few beers and the feeling that it was their chance.

On their return the astronauts reported that the Great Wall of China was the only man-made object they had been able to identify from space. Jewish history, like the Great Wall, is a monumental phenomenon. I feel satisfied in a special way that I am part of an enterprise that has played a central role in world civilization and which will outlive me.

Oh, come on, there is no particular virtue in longevity. Old age is a cane and failing eyesight. The future belongs to the young. Besides, there are a lot of old folks still around: Egyptians, Greeks, the Chinese. . . .

All of us have known folk who have lived into their nineties and whose accomplishments only charity would allow us to describe as modest. Despite Grandma Moses types, the last years usually are uncreative, a time for sitting around and being cared for. In an endurance contest the price is usually not worth the effort. What lifts me up is not that our history is a long one but that it has been mysteriously significant across time. There have never been a whole lot of us but there is hardly an era in which we have not been creative.

There was a lot of shaking of heads. Someone said gently: With all due respect, rabbi, I think you are deluding yourself. A few years ago I took a survey course in world history. We spent a day on the Israelites and the Hebrew Bible. The prof talked about its original ideas but left the clear impression that the Bible's importance was due largely to the later interest in it of Christianity. After that one lecture the Jewish people were never mentioned nor any Jewish contributions to civilization until the last week when we talked about the Jew as victim. As he talked about the Dreyfus Trial, the Russian pogroms and the Nuremberg laws, I was reminded of a Religious

School teacher who seemed always to be discussing exiles, forced conversions, the ghetto and the gas chamber. I draw no encouragement from our lengthy record as history's most available victim.

I picked up on this last remark: ask yourself why we were so often the chosen victim. I look on the world's antipathy as a perverse tribute to the power of ideas to which our tradition witnesses. The privileged are often anti-semitic because they know that democracy and justice are Jewish in character; and the ideologues of the left, the anti-privilege, are often anti-semitic because they know or sense that the Torah tradition is concerned with the individual as well as the collective, with means as well as ends.

Oh, come on, they want after us because we would not bow to their gods, play in their games or eat in their restaurants.

Prejudice begins in the myths of those who engage in the putdown, not in the acts of those who are calumniated. Most analyses of European anti-semitism locate its roots in the New Testament. The gospel writers aided and abetted by Paul set up the Torah tradition as the straw man against which they could score points. Judaism described as a dry and lifeless legalism provided effective contrast for their antinomian emphases. Eager to appeal to Romans, the early church made the Jew rather than Pontius Pilate responsible for the Crucifixion, the Jew is made to cry out for Jesus' death, and later developed a theology of contempt whose basic thesis was that God had ordered that The Temple be destroyed as punishment and sentenced the Jews to be wandering pariahs. It followed that Christians were obeying God's will, doing good when they forced the Jew to wear a demeaning costume, denied the Jew standing in law and set up the rules of apartheid which governed Christian-Jewish relations for fifteen hundred years. Forced off the land and denied entrance into most occupations and guilds, the Jew was forced to make a living any way he could, which meant that he had no alternative but to enter those occupations his neighbors shunned, and as peddler or pawnbroker he not only absorbed the peasants' and the urban poor's abuse,

no one loves his creditors; but gained the disdain of the Well-to-do who would never deign to sully their hands in such demeaning activities, but who were not above extorting from the Jew whatever he managed to accumulate.

There are other explanations of anti-semitism and most have some validity, set apart he lived a different life and difference creates unease; but I would suggest that when all is said and done the Jew was victim because our survival kept alive ideas and values which challenged the self-confident assumptions of the majority. Christianity claimed to be the truth, but the Jew was obstinate and could not and would not see 'the truth'; so either the Christians had to accept that the gospel's claims were not as self-evident as they thought or that Jews had been sentenced to spiritual blindness until the Second Coming. Kings believed they had the right to rule as they saw fit, but the Hebrew tradition denied that right. Priests and popes believed they controlled the keys to the kingdom, but Jews acted as if they knew that the Archangel Gabriel would let them in. Monks gambled their lives on the consummate virtue of celibacy and a life of denial while rabbis married and went out into the world. We get terribly angry with those who stand in the way and the Torah and the Jew stood in the way of the universal Church, of absolutist power and of politics of privilege.

Our fate has had its tragic aspect but I wonder, if our history were a happier one, whether the record would show us to have been as committed to social welfare issues and as hypersensitive to justice. I am convinced that the combination of ancient teaching and familiarity of persecution is responsible for many of the fine qualities which are expressed by the Jewish community: compassion, empathy, a pragmatic attitude towards security and success; the feeling that those who are in distress must be succored; open-handed generosity; an impatience with privilege. We owe our instinct for justice perhaps as much to Amos as apartheid.

Come off it, my father often remarks that Senator McCarthy's two henchmen were Jews.

Not all Jews are sensitive or charitable or committed to social justice; but a remarkable number were and are. The ghetto was a dismal place where high walls rarely let in the sunlight, but within this cramped area Jews constructed a remarkably compassionate community, full of cultural and welfare institutions which preserved the family and mitigated the social and psychological cost of persecution. Recent studies of black ghettos have helped us become aware of the insidious ways in which systematic humiliation can brutalize and degrade a people. That the Jewish family retained a good measure of cohesion and the community a measure of dignity, that the Jew was not completely broken by ostracism and suffering testifies to the functional value of Torah-consecrated way of life.

I was brought back to the victim question. You're talking sociology. The real issue is God. The Torah tradition has proved its value as a survival mechanism; but why did Jews have to face the cruelties they did? Why did God let Jews suffer this way. To explain anti-semitism sociologically is to suggest that God has nothing to do with history; if He hasn't, then the Torah tradition with its emphasis on sacred history and Divine Providence falls apart, and Auschwitz marks the end of the line for any pious talk about a God who cares.

The question of unmerited suffering is as old as Job and the Torah tradition has addressed it. Some argued that suffering is good for the soul. Through storms we grow. Our sufferings are from God. When prosperity and health are on us we tend to forget that life is brief and bruising and are rather brusque with those who are not as fortunate as we. Grief and pain can sensitize us to another's need and bring to the surface our latent capacity for empathy. I remember a young married couple, born to wealth, totally self-involved, long skiing trips and expensive cars. Their first child early on developed a rare blood and long-lived blood disease. Forced out of themselves, forced to face the pain of the world, they grew into caring people. But there are times when the suffering is so intense that it coarsens the soul and

deadens the spirit. I remember the concentration camp survivor who explained patiently why she had decided not to have children: 'I simply can't let myself feel that deeply any more.'

Others have argued that suffering represents a trial which allows God to discover whether we are strong in our faith or fair weather people. How else will God know whom to admit to Heaven? The first Jew, Abraham, was tested. He stood firm and was awarded the covenant of land and progeny. Presumably, if we are steadfast we will enjoy God's grace; if not in this world, then in the World to Come. But there are those fortunate few who are not tested. What kind of God would dump on some but not on others? Then, too, there may be no Heaven.

Your arguments are interesting, but I did not ask why innocent people suffer, but why the Jewish people have suffered more than any other.

Have we? Some day read a history of the Armenians or the Druzes. We've had our share and more, but I doubt that we're number one on the most persecuted list.

The prophets insisted that Israel's sufferings, in their time this meant bad harvests and military defeat, was the result of the covenant and of God's special relationship with us. This popular view provided, until our day, the mythic terms in which the Jew explained to himself his history. Essentially, it's a we-get-what-we-signed-for doctrine. At Sinai we agreed to the covenant terms including the rewards for obedience and the punishments for default. The Biblical histories were edited to prove that the nation prospered when it was obedient and suffered when it sinned. The prophets of Israel "heard" God "render judgment". "Thus says the Lord: For three transgressions of Israel, yea, for four, I will not reverse their punishment." What was their sin? "Because they sell the righteous for silver and the needy for a pair of shoes and trample the head of the poor in the dust of the earth." exile was seen as a deserved punishment. If and when the people repented galut, exile, would end and God would return them to their land.

Do you actually believe that history operates this way? I find it infinitely sad that some went to their deaths in Nazi Europe, beating their breasts and confessing, 'It is because of our sins'.

So do I. So did the apocalyptic writers who followed the prophets and who insisted that God determined the course of history for his own purposes and not on the basis of deserved merit. I don't believe that there is a quid pro quo in life. I've seen some pretty healthy and prosperous bastards. Job's challenge is based solidly on experience and cannot be blinked away; but over time there does seem to be something of a balancing out. Israel is and many a powerful empire is not, and there are spiritual rewards, peace of mind, which cannot be measured by an outside observer. "Better a small morsel and quiet therewith than a house full of feasting and strife."

Aren't you trying to justify God's ways to us and didn't you tell us earlier that was a form of theological chutzpah?

Well taken. God does not explain himself to Job. God simply reveals His majesty to him. "Where were you when I rolled out the Heavens?", which translates: 'have faith in God's wisdom; don't waste too much time worrying about what you'll never fully understand; and don't judge by anyone's material circumstances.' Despite his sufferings Job was what he knew himself to be, a good man. Net worth and human worth are unrelated standards.

Walter Kaufman in an interesting work called The Faith of a Heretic describes the conclusion of Job's work as one in which the righteous man is made to confront the "tragic power" of the world. "This is the ultimate truth of philosophy. There is a power beyond us and the power makes no sense except that it is there, and man must, as best he can and with what composure and equanimity he can muster, simply accept life on its terms."

I think Kaufman is mistaken in his analysis of Job and he is certainly outside the Torah tradition when he defines tragic power as the ultimate truth. The God Who reveals Himself to Job in the whirlwind reveals not only naked power but purposeful power. Creation is not a chaotic structure. There

is a mysterious and wonderful order. If Job cannot fathom the totality of that purpose he still senses it.

From the point of view of the Torah tradition Kaufman is a heretic. He does not deny God, but he denies that God is kind. We touch here the leap of faith a Jew must make if he wishes to be caught up in the Torah tradition. I often end a service with a benediction taken directly from the book of Psalms: "The Lord shall guard your going out and your coming in, from this time *forth* and forever." As I've said before, the Jewish God is not a tyrant but a loving Father, Protector, ^{/this} "Guardian of Israel Who neither slumbers nor sleeps". Remember the question Heaven's gatekeeper asks: did you remain confident of redemption? The Torah's faith, and mine, is not faith in a power outside ourselves but in a purposive power outside ourselves, a faith in the messianic possibility of life.

Our orders were to live in dignity and according to God's law and, by so doing, to set an example that others might follow. Being chosen conferred few privileges save that of knowing that God had a set of special rules for us. God would not let us be satisfied with compromises which were routine elsewhere, which brings us back to your question, after all, the reasonings and rationalizations.

Must not a tragedy of the dimensions of the Holocaust destroy, once and for all, such a faith? The six million did not get what they deserved.

I have no answer. The Holocaust is overwhelming. How does one think about not only the malignancy called Nazism but the unresponsiveness of the Allies to pleas that the rail lines to Auschwitz be bombed and their adamant maintenance of restrictive immigration quotas? The record of the cruelty and indifference of men is sad and must give pause to any naive notions about man's basic and innate goodness; but it also must be said that there were non-Jews of compassion and bravery in Nazi Europe who hid Jews, helped Jews to escape and who, in so doing, put their life at stake. The silence which seems unrelieved is God's.

Do you remember the story I told the Institute a few days ago about Moses visiting the Academy of Akiba and being astonished at many of the teachings being quoted as the law of Moses? I did not tell you the full story as the Talmud reports it. After God reassured Moses that what Akiba teaches is in fact Torah, Moses says to God: 'How is it that knowing such a genius would arise, you gave the Torah through me?' To which God answered, 'Be silent, such is My decree.' God allowed Moses to see Akiba's life and his death. He was burned alive by the Romans during the Bar Kochba Rebellion and his skin sold in the marketplace. Moses was appalled: 'Is this the reward for such learning and devotion?' 'Be silent, for such is My decree.'

There are occurrences we do not understand.

Our sages defined atheism, not as the denial of the existence of God, one can affirm an Unmoved Mover and still not be religious; but, as the denial of God's justice: Leit din ve'leit dayan, there is no justice and there is no judge. Evidence of God's Providence is, to say the least, inconclusive. How shall we explain the death of a newborn or the fate of the Jewish people, so it is precisely here that the Jew must make his leap into faith.

You can't leave it there.

Job's comforters tried not to, but none of their arguments, which were much like those we have talked about, satisfied the sufferer. Indeed, Job was never satisfied by any words of consolation. When I feel put upon by life, all explanations offered me are exposed as rationalizations. The words which seem to explain in fact simply cover up. In the end it was an emotional experience, not logic, which allowed Job to make his peace with life. God offered no explanations save a revelation of the incomparable majesty of creation and inferentially of the Creator. There are questions which cannot be answered intellectually but which find their answer when we allow ourselves to feel the depths of purpose behind the everyday confusions and that's what faith is all about.

I have been a rabbi for nearly thirty years and I have discovered an

unexpected truth about the human reaction to tragedy. Tragedy rarely snuffs out faith. As a young rabbi I expected to hear someone beaten to his knees cry out in anger and deny. I have heard complaints, certainly, 'why me', but I have rarely known a Job whose faith was shattered by illness, ill luck or grief. It is as if when on our knees we look up and see the power that we could not stay and are overawed by the fullness of God's might. Generally I have heard at such moments a half-whispered, half-believing, 'perhaps it is for the best.'

I can't get the Akiba story out of my mind. It suggests that God has an arbitrary streak and is really a cruel God.

No. It suggests that there are facets to life we cannot explain and must learn to accept. Consciousness is given. Our endowments are given. Death is a given and so are illness and pain. There is a pragmatic side to the Torah tradition which says: 'don't weary yourself over metaphysical questions you will never fully resolve.' The Hebrew letter Bet is the first letter of the first word in the Torah. Why B rather than A? Simple, the sages said. The Hebrew letter B consists of three strokes which form three sides of a square. The missing side opens towards the flow of the text. Bet was chosen as a signal to us to read what follows carefully and not worry too much about what is above, what below and what precedes creation as we know it.

The Akiba story would fit Kaufman's thesis about tragic power. Are you saying that the power beyond us, God, is indifferent to our actions and that we must simply learn to cope with our circumstances with such composure as we can muster? Surely, the rabbis were not stoics. They bent the knee to a God who listens and responds to prayer. They trusted that God would accept their repentance and end the Exile. You told us that when the Torah is read on the holidays the service includes God's self-definition as merciful and compassionate, long suffering and full of mercy and truth.

The Torah also says: "God's ways are not your ways." There is an ultimate order but its specifics cannot be fully apprehended.

Rabbi, you are slipping away from the issue. We are talking about Jews, yellow badges, pogroms, Stalin, Hitler and Arab wars against Israel. The question is why continue a pilgrimage which obviously angers or frightens so many others and why should God have dumped on us in this cruel way?

I called up an image offered by an anonymous prophet who lived among the Judean exiles in Babylon. These were difficult years. The Temple had been destroyed. Jerusalem had been razed. As prisoners the Judeans were no longer masters of their fate, they couldn't organize a Torah-based community since they were ruled by others, so the question had to be answered: how could a slave people serve God? This prophet described the people were prisoners and little esteemed, yet he held that they remained ultimately significant in God's plans. They were God's suffering servants. Their role was to bear the pains of the world. Israel's role was to proclaim God's truth by example and by word, but the nations were comfortable with idolatry and didn't want to be disturbed. The sleeper wants only to squash the noisy mosquito which buzzes around his head so that he can go back to his slumber, "so Israel was despised, forsaken of man, a people of pain from whom others hid their faces." Israel is the nagging conscience of the world. As long as Israel remains, the nation's sleep will be fitful.

We choose as victims those who remind us of our limitations and failings and who by their very existence challenge our familiar beliefs. The Protestant theologian put it this way: "By being hostile to the Jewish people the world simply proves that it is the world: blind and deaf and stupid in the ways of God, as they are visibly before it in the existence of this people" (Karl Barth, Church Dogmatics, p. 511). A century ago the ministers of the Russian Czar were quite open as to the reasons for the pogroms and the policy of deliberate Jewish impoverishment. They identified Jews with subversive ideas like democracy and freedom /which were not wanted in absolutist Russia and deliberately set out to quarantine, convert or expel the bearers of these ideas. In much the same way the medieval Church, not only locked up the Hebrew Bible from the faithful lest

they read and question official doctrine, but forbade those who could read the text, the Jews, to discuss The Book with Christians lest the faithful be misled. To probe into the causes of anti-semitism is to understand something of what the Jew has meant to civilization.

I'm not sure I like the idea of being a whipping boy for no better reason than that the world is morally indolent and unwilling to give up unwarranted privileges or restrain its passions. But the question remains, what kind of God would punish the innocent rather than the guilty?

Neither logic nor social science theory can answer that problem for us. Why are some born to luxury and some into the poverty of Bangladesh? By our standards the world is not a fair place. There are questions which can't be answered. The question to which faith suggests an answer is whether to bless God or blame God for making it as it is.

Bless God?

If space ship earth were paradise what challenge would there be? Doesn't the gift of self-consciousness, the quality which distinguishes the human being from the animal, require that there be neutral space in which personality and character can unfold and grow, an incomplete universe? The possibility of the soul's unfolding requires the possibility that our actions may be terribly wrong.

Moreover, when I think about suffering and God's responsibility, I must ask: is the fault man's or God's? Before peoples cut down the jungle and overcropped the land, Bangladesh supported a thriving civilization.

You are being theoretical and this discussion is personal. Why should one people have suffered so much?

In many ways the persecutor is worse off than the persecuted. Power corrupts. During the long medieval passage, Jewish literacy and family life was infinitely superior to that of the Crusaders, Inquisitors and simple bullies.

That's a modest reward for the centuries of pain. If Israel's suffering is part of God's plans, God is incredibly cruel.

War and apartheid are not really God's doing. They are human activities which God could override only by denying to man the fundamental capacity of freedom.

But why?

I don't know. The sages admitted as much; remember: seek not to explain God's ways to man because those are beyond your understanding.

That's a copout.

Only if you believe everything can be explained. Remember; the Torah tradition rests ultimately on faith. Some see only the death camps. Others see the bunker in Berlin. Others see 1948 and the creation of the State of Israel. Look again at the mysterious significance of Jewish history.

But six million did not survive to contemplate what you call the mysterious significance of Jewish history.

I know. If you conceive of God as a supernatural being who sits on a Heavenly Throne controlling the lives of history, you must wonder at the justice He dispenses. Those who held such a view of God had no alternative after the Holocaust but to say, "God is dead."

Over the centuries the Torah tradition has fought a brave battle to disabuse us of the idea that God is a Heavenly Grandfather. You shall not make any graven images. Why not? Because these suggest that God can be described. We inevitably take our descriptions from the only world we know and assume that God's actions must conform to our conventional standards in order to be accepted as just or good. No wonder the sages used every euphemism and paraphrase they could imagine to make us conscious that the Holy One, Praised be He, was holy, other, and not to be conceived or judged as we judge each other.

One of the Torah tradition's favorite names for God was makom - place. God is the animating spirit of all that is. Such a God creates a world full of possibility and it is up to man to meet the challenge.

But would a benevolent God create in man our evident capacity for evil?

For an education and then suspicious that we are consoling ourselves with

We're back to the question of consciousness and free will and to the paradox that if God were to restrict man's freedom and power He would be narrowing our responsibilities and diminishing our control over our lives.

But six million were killed.

And many millions more. Jews were not the only victims. No, I do not avoid the issue. I try to transcend it. You ask for a reasonable answer. Reasons are little more than words. These events are elemental and therefore beyond reason's grasp. The Torah tradition has never denied the reality of pain and cruelty, but our histories emphasize how the faithful have carried on. Four hundred years ago Solomon ibn Verga told this story in a history describing the persecution and exile of the Jews of Spain and Portugal.

A ship was stricken with plague and the captain made for the nearest land fall where he unceremoniously left the passengers on a deserted beach. Many died there of hunger. A few, including a Jew, his wife and two sons, tried to make it on foot to some settlement. They walked with great effort but it proved too much for the woman who collapsed and died. The man carried his two sons until he fainted from exhaustion. When he revived he found the boys dead beside him. In great distress he rose to his feet and said: Lord of the universe, You are doing a lot to make me abandon my faith. Known then, truly, that despite the dwellers in Heaven I am a Jew and a Jew I shall remain and nothing that you have brought upon me or will bring upon me shall avail.

That poor man represents the posture of faith. His words only repeat the Psalmist's pledge: "though He (God) slay me, yet will I believe in Him." Faith describes the convictions we hold to despite our experiences. We live in a world where the Holocaust is possible. We live in a world where a just and secure world order is possible. Our test is to have faith in life's possibilities and to act on this faith. Ibn Verga's age was as tear stained as ours, yet most hold firm. Our problem is that we are less bound up in the Torah tradition and half suspicious that we are consoling ourselves with

fiction.

Is it?

I think not. Recent history cannot be read as unrelieved tragedy. Great changes are taking place across the globe. The masses are coming alive and their individuality and potential is being exposed. Swooping political and social change always entail friction and conflict and an unsettled society is full of frustration and potential violence; but the measure of our potential for violence is also a measure of our potential for meaningful change. You can't have the one without the other.

Prayer and imagination can help us see beyond ~~what~~ the frightening headlines to the hidden and hopeful dimensions of our existence. As we work for a sounder community, we sense the potential for good which God has implanted in us and creation.

There are no guarantees. Man ultimately may destroy human life on this planet; but it need not happen, if we have the Faith.