

Statement and Questions

AMERICAN JEWS and American Judaism have lately come under increasing pressure from a variety of sources, ranging from secularism and movements of personal and sexual liberation to multiculturalism, religious syncretism, and, on the other side, a newly assertive Christian conservatism. To the challenge of contemporary American culture, ever larger numbers of Jews appear to be responding by assimilating, marrying out, or otherwise falling away—although among some there has also been an intense and perhaps surprising movement in the opposite direction, toward a return to religious practice.

In the face of these realities, we would like you to address the following two groups of questions concerning your own personal beliefs and your view of the religious scene:

1. Do you believe in God? Do you believe the Torah to be divine revelation? Do you accept the binding nature of any, some, or all of the commandments?

2. In what sense do you believe the Jews are the chosen people of God? What is the distinctive role of the Jewish people in the world today? Of Jewish messianism?

3. How have, respectively, the Holocaust and the existence of the state of Israel influenced your faith, your religious identity, your observance?

4. In your judgment, which aspects of the contemporary American situation, including the political situation, offer the greatest stimulus to Jewish belief, and which pose the most serious challenge either to Jewish belief or to Jewish continuity?

5. What is your assessment of the current denominational and ideological divisions within American Judaism? To what degree are you worried about Jewish religious unity?

6. Do you see any prospect of a *large-scale* revival of Judaism in America?

David Berger

THIS SYMPOSIUM explicitly evokes a concrete historical context, but its early questions address realities that are in the deepest sense timeless. The joy and pain of the religious life speak to the profoundest needs and most exalted yearnings of the human spirit. So demanding, so inexorable are these needs that to abandon God is perforce to seek other gods.

I do not speak of a yearning for cheap comfort. One of the many paradoxes of the human condition is that we seek tranquility, yet it makes us restless. The comforts of serious religion come amid the very anguish that it addresses, even creates. God is Provider of consolation and Author

of suffering. “Sages,” say the talmudic rabbis, “have no rest in this world or in the world to come.”

The belief in a commanding God is central to this spiritual *agon* in Judaism. The challenge of observing the commandments without picking and choosing is precisely what makes them commandments, and it is only the belief that they are binding which gives them their power both to restrain and to liberate, to hurt and to heal.

Some years ago, I heard a prominent American sociologist with marginal knowledge of Orthodox Judaism comment with more than a touch of mockery on the supposed spiritual elevation achieved by a refusal to drive on Saturday. I was angered, but I also felt sorry for him. He would never grasp the simple truth in the bumper stick-

er that says, "Hang in there—*Shabbes* is coming," and he would never understand that it is precisely because believing Jews have no choice but to observe the "legalistic minutiae of the law" that they can be freed from quotidian anxieties and pressures for a full day each week. What is it, I wonder, that regulates the rhythms of life for those untouched by this blessing?

The benefits bestowed by Jewish chosenness are, of course, far from unmixed. For millennia, Jews have struggled with the problem of evil without the luxury of dispassionate reflection. The Holocaust is the ultimate embodiment of one of the deep ironies of a chosenness that we cannot relinquish even when we try: a people that has often prided itself on being the bearer of a religion of reason is called upon to exemplify the triumph of faith in the face of the inexplicable.

This task has certainly been made far easier by the historic act of providence that took place with the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948, though the foundations of Judaism cannot be made to rest even on so sublime an event. As for the Holocaust, a "614th commandment" not to allow Hitler to prevail (a formula proposed by the religious thinker Emil L. Fackenheim) cannot serve as the bedrock of Jewish commitment. Believing Jews maintain their faith despite the Holocaust, not because of it.

Though the chosenness of Israel is a central biblical motif, an overarching theme of the Book of Genesis suggests that the seed of Abraham was selected, as it were, after the fact, following the "failure" of God's original design for humanity. The famous statement in the Mishnah, the rabbinic code of laws, that Adam was created singly so that no one would be able to say, "My father is greater than yours," underscores the universality of the original creation. After the first sin, the Creator did not give up, but eventually He was forced to destroy His handiwork and try again. Once more, a transgression of cosmic proportions compelled a readjustment, and this time Abraham was chosen. Why Abraham? "Because I know him, that he will instruct his children . . . to do what is just and right" (Genesis 18:19). The mission of Israel is an ethical one with a universal dimension.

As an Orthodox Jew, I look at this last sentence with a sense of unease. Not long ago, I saw a flyer at Hebrew Union College announcing a talk on "Judaism and Social Justice." My initial, light-hearted comment was that in this Reform venue, the title was a tautology; my second, more

conflicted response, was that in some Orthodox settings it might appear vaguely unkosher, smacking somehow of alien provenance.

Neither reaction is fair, but each caricatures a genuine problem. A significant segment of Reform Jewry has become little more than a vehicle for fashionable social and political trends, and even mainstream Conservative Judaism is no longer anchored by a firm commitment to Jewish law. Orthodox Jews, on the other hand, face the challenge of reinvigorating our commitment to those strands of the tradition which underscore the universal ethic of Judaism. I do not pretend to know quite how this blend of a particularistic commitment to the "sanctity of Israel" and a larger vision of a perfected world works to produce a special impact on humanity as a whole, but the remarkable, disproportionate attention that a tiny people has received throughout its history indicates that somehow God knew what He was doing.

A religious minority in the United States cannot remain unaffected by the standing of religion in the society at large. For us, a host of conflicting forces should ideally be poised in an exquisitely balanced equilibrium. Religion should be very important but not too important; the Bible should be taught in public schools, but with rigorous religious neutrality; religious diversity should be respected and encouraged without succumbing to a relativism of values. The dynamic processes of the real world make such a balance difficult, often impossible.

To pursue one of these examples, the need to preserve church-state separation can be critically important to Jews, but it means that the Bible is barely mentioned in many school systems. Even at the highest levels of our intelligentsia, the central text of Western civilization has become altogether marginalized. The dimensions of this cultural catastrophe were brought home to me when Harold Bloom's *The Book of J*, which repeatedly analyzes phrases in the Bible that are simply not there, went unrecognized for what it was until Robert Alter exposed it in a rather gentle article in COMMENTARY (November 1990). The 15th-century scholar Rabbi Isaac Arama commented that God had seen to the survival of His people by exiling them among nations to whom Judaism mattered. The concern with Judaism as a religion is dwindling, and with it Jewish identity itself.

In a welcoming society, Judaism will be hard-pressed to survive without a distinctive message.

Such a message is to be found primarily within Orthodoxy, whose adherents also retain the greatest sense of connectedness to the Jews in the state of Israel. It is therefore especially regrettable that even with the best will in the world, relations between Orthodoxy and other denominations face grave difficulties. Put simply, Reform Judaism's success, even survival, is dependent upon the infusion of substantial numbers of people who are not Jewish by Orthodox criteria. Orthodoxy's refusal to recognize their Jewishness is a function not of intolerant zealotry but of simple integrity—and those Conservative Jews who extend such recognition compromise the historic principles of their own movement.

For the sake of harmonious interaction with a Jewish denomination encompassing both Jews and Gentiles, Orthodoxy will have to revive the classical category of God-fearing Gentiles and apply it this time to individuals who see themselves as Jews, while the latter will have to cooperate with people who deny their Jewishness. This, I am afraid, is a best-case scenario. One cannot but contemplate it with the most profound concern. I am hopeful, but I am not sanguine.

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Saul J. Berman

I FIND BELIEF in God to be simple; my real struggle is to achieve knowledge of the existence of God. Maimonides, in the first positive commandment in his *Book of the Commandments*, leaves uncertain whether the prime *mitzvah*, or commandment, is belief in or knowledge of His existence. I think that the real challenge of religion is to gain knowledge of God and Her will for each of us, through revelation, reason, and experience.

The more I study the Torah the more I am convinced that it is the revealed word of God. The more I study ancient cultures, the more I see the absolutely radical disparity between the values of pagan civilizations and the values which Torah brought into the world. Torah was God's

weapon in the war against idolatrous culture; and war it was.

I believe that the Torah is the expression of God's wisdom for the Jewish people, and ultimately for all of humanity. Therefore, every *mitzvah* of the Torah is the bearer of meaning and of potential for perfection. The distinctive values of Torah are taught through laws directly governing the relationships among individuals. Those same values are also taught through their ritual enactment which serves as symbolic communication, shared by the community and available for transmission to the next generation.

We are in some measure the victims of our own success. Partly through our own efforts and partly through the achievements of Christianity and Islam, the dominant elements of the Jewish world view have become commonly accepted, at least in principle if not in practice, by Western society. So much so, that, tragically, the average Jew would probably not be able to assert with any confidence the existence of a distinctive Jewish ethic.

The Torah, the prophets, and the rabbis all taught that God's election of the Jewish people invested us with a special mission—to utilize the Torah as a tool to transform ourselves, both individually and nationally, into models, inviting emulation by the rest of humanity. Our duty is, both directly and indirectly, to promulgate the spiritual grandeur, the social holiness, and the ethical integrity of life rooted in God's Torah.

If we look realistically at the world, is there any doubt that there is much we still have to teach about the implementation of Torah's values in the general society? Indeed, there is a vast untapped reservoir of Torah's ethical and spiritual teachings waiting to be unfolded. We have yet to promote the duty to rescue, and the criminality of the failure to rescue; the duty of sensitivity to the emotions of others in the context of commercial relationships; and the potential for spirituality and holiness in the deepest parts of the creative and productive processes.

I struggle sporadically, but intensely, with the integration of the Holocaust into my religious *Weltanschauung*. I have no answers, only observations. How rapidly hatred can descend into dehumanization and allow treatment of the "other" as an object—with total inhumanity. How easily good and decent people can be denuded of their values; how thin is the patina of Christian civilization. Sophisticated and educated Jewish leaders, religious and secular, had no greater insight