

What do American Jews believe? A symposium.(part 1)

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Introduction

WHATEVER ELSE American Jews may believe in, it is doubtful the majority of them believe in Judaism. That at least is what the surveys suggest, as do the low rates of synagogue membership on the one hand, the high rates of intermarriage on the other. In an effort to gauge the current state of religious opinion among the engaged minority, the editors of COMMENTARY turned to prominent rabbis and thinkers across the denominational spectrum.

The contributions printed here do not represent a complete cross section of Jewish religious thought today. In particular, regrettably excluded by our rules of selection were a number of distinguished figures who are either not

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?

Arthur Green

The first question is all wrong, even offensive. Its formulation is classically Christian rather than Jewish (beginning with the Credo), and not in the nicest sense. There is even a whiff about it of the religious/political Right. "Do you believe in God?" Are you a good American? Have you ever belonged to an atheist organization? Phooey.

Religious thought has moved significantly in the past two generations under the influences of both existentialism and mysticism. The proper question is, "Do you consider yourself a religious person? How do you express that religiosity? What is the relationship between your own spiritual life and the symbols of Judaism? In what sense do you use the word 'God' or its Hebrew equivalent in your religious life?"

Now which questions shall I answer, yours or mine? Essentially I am a Jewish monist. I encounter life as a single reality. When seen from the viewpoint of unity, that whole of being is called Y-H-W-H (or that old pagan-rooted and misleading word "God," if you must). When seen from the standpoint of our fragmented daily existence it is called HaWaYaH, meaning "existence." I do not know a Fellow or a Force "out there," beyond the world in some quasi-spatial sense, Who creates, reveals, redeems. But I do believe there is a deep consciousness that underlies existence, that each human mind is a part of the universal Mind, and that the Whole is sometimes accessible ("revealed") to its parts. The One of which I speak is transcendent, in that it is infinitely elusive and mysterious, while yet being deeply immanent, present throughout the world to those whose eyes are open.

In ways I do not claim to understand, Universal Mind is also Universal Heart; we reach inward toward it by emotional openness as well as by contemplative detachment. Awareness of this underlying and all-pervasive oneness of being leads me to feelings of awe and wonder, to a desire to be present to it always. In an act of faith that does not seem far-fetched, I assert that the One also seeks to be known and recognized by the many; "my" longing is a reflection of "its" longing, as "my" mind is a fragment of "its" Mind. It thus causes the impulse within us to need religious expression and to create forms through which we will attain deeper knowledge and awareness of the One. In that sense you may say that the essential forms of our religion are "revealed": they are our human creative response to the divine presence that makes itself known within us.

I believe that the most essential message of Judaism is that each of us is created in the image of God. We exist for the purpose of teaching that message. The ten utterances ("Let there be . . .") in Genesis 1, leading up to the creation of humans, affirm that this principle exists within nature. In their imperative form, these self-expressions of the One reveal themselves as ten commandments, the binding power of which I fully affirm.

As a tradition-embracing Jew, I hear the voice of my Beloved (yes, there is room for eros in monism!) calling to me from within many of the commandments, customs, and teachings of the Jewish people. That same Beloved, of course, also calls to me from treetops, from within great music, and from "behind the lattice-work" of the Song of Songs. My response is inadequate, partial, fragmentary, "merely" human.

I am not a literal affirmer of Jewish chosenness. It is we who proclaimed ourselves chosen, not God. If by "chosen" you mean vocation, however, I do believe that the Jewish people has a specific mission, as indicated above. We have a unique relationship with the One, based on our key experience/idea of the human as God's image. Our distinctive role, today as always, is to teach that message, chiefly by example. Therefore such matters as how prisoners are treated in Israeli jails, how the rights of the Arab minority are handled in Israel, and how our community reacts to incidents of wife-beating in our midst go to the very heart of Jewish existence and meaning. These are not "liberal" values taken from some extraneous source, but rather testing grounds for our fulfillment of our deepest and most essentially Jewish purpose.

Messianism means retaining our vision of a world redeemed, a world in which every person and each people will experience liberation as we did when we came out of Egypt. Surely our unique liberation was meant to be paradigmatic: it includes the journey from the sea, where we rejoiced, to the mountain, where we accepted the rules needed for responsible community. We should be helping others along this same dual path; liberation and commitment are our model. Fortunately our other commitment to each human being as God's image did not allow us to rejoice as our enemy drowned; we are committed to liberation, but we can never celebrate violence. Human life is too holy.

The Holocaust has been a shaping event mostly in a negative way. Its terrible shadow forced Jewish theology to become a vehicle of survival, of self-justification, of endless rounds in the losing fight with theodicy. But the scars are just now beginning to heal and we are starting to move forward. We must never forget, but we must allow for that healing.

Israel: I am a committed but mostly nontheological Zionist. The renewal/liberation of our people, including its language and culture, that has taken place under the Zionist banner, is one I fully support and in which I participate. Though I might have supported binationalism in the 30's, today I fully affirm the need for a Jewish state; I visit Israel frequently and love it deeply. I even have to admit that I feel something of prophecy fulfilled when I see the tribes returned and the desert blooming. Still, something chokes in me each time I hear the phrase, "the beginning of our redemption." Such claims are dangerous.

America: it may be no accident that we Jews find ourselves in the most pious, God-seeking country of the Western world. That is the best news about America. The worst? Superficiality, commercialism, and all the rest. Too much wealth is not very good for us, either. We are choking on our success. A special concern is that America is so race-driven that it cannot recognize ethnic diversity among Caucasians. We want to survive in America as a distinctive cultural-ethnic-religious minority group, most of whose members happen to have white skin. Is there room for such a group in a future United States?

I am a committed anti-denominationalist in Jewish life. It is my hope that all the denominational divisions outside Orthodoxy will soon disappear, since they very poorly reflect most Jews. Many rabbis agree with this view; the great enemy of progress in this direction is denominational control of placement lists and pension plans.

I am very concerned about the Orthodox/heterodox rift and I think all sides should make greater efforts to avoid it. Neither can compromise basic principles, however, and for liberals these include the legitimacy of our rabbinate and gender equality. I believe that the acceptance of patrilineal descent by Reform was a mistake, mainly because it lessens the need for conversion and thus misses an educational opportunity.

As for the prospects of a revival, how large is "large"? See Deuteronomy 7:7 ("It is not because you are the most numerous of peoples that the Lord . . . chose you"). I see our numbers diminishing, branches falling off the family tree. I am as distressed about this as is any committed Jew. But (since the days of Moses) we do not consider it a mitzvah to count Jews. On the contrary, I think it is more or less forbidden, and I hereby send all our demographers to the mikveh (ritual bath) to atone for violating that transgression.

Besides, we Jews have better things to do. We have to help fix a broken world. We have mitzvot to do, including especially those of relieving the suffering and injustice that keep so many of our fellow humans from seeing the image of God in themselves and others. We should be so busy with this work that we have no time to count Jews and worry about our survival.

We should also be building a Jewish spiritual life that will work for this new era of Jewish history. Wasn't Moses told somewhere in the middle of those chapters in Exodus on the Tabernacle, "If you build it, they will come"?

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