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Commentary

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 Americans or are Americans residing elsewhere (for example in Israel). As for the 47 who appear below, they include heads of rabbinical seminaries; congregational rabbis; officials of the Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, and Reconstructionist movements; scholars and professors; and independent intellectuals whose diverse perspectives have been avowedly influenced by their religious faith.

To close readers of what follows, a slight statistical bias may seem to prevail in favor of Orthodox or otherwise traditionalist sentiment. If so, it is due mostly to the accident of who responded to our invitation. (In fact the Conservative movement still claims the largest number of synagogue members, followed closely by Reform and then Orthodoxy.) But the distribution also reflects a reality freely proclaimed or conceded by most of the respondents themselves: among affiliated Jews in general, religion is back, and it is fueled by traditionalism. Although hardly the only piece of news to be found in the present collocation, this may well be the most striking, particularly as coming out of an American community routinely characterized as a standard-bearer of secularism in our time.

On this and other matters, including the critical questions of religious authority and religious unity, "What Do American Jews Believe?" is intended not only to clarify contemporary positions but to further a discussion inaugurated in COMMENTARY exactly thirty years ago this month, in the now-historic symposium, "The State of Jewish Belief." Some but by no means all of the present questions were framed to permit a general comparison with views put forward three decades ago. Four contributors to the August 1966 issue join us again here.

--ED.

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 sticker 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 hardpressed 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 His 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 into the historical forces sweeping them up than did the simplest Jewish laborer. And in the aftermath, Christian society has still not learned the Jewish concept and practice of teshuvah, "return."

While I remain unresolved on the question of the uniqueness of the Holocaust in Jewish history, I see clearly the challenge and opportunity placed before those of us who have merited being alive at the birth and infancy of the Third Jewish Commonwealth. I am deeply a Diaspora Jew. I do not believe that I am bound by halakhah, Jewish religious law, to live in Israel, and I am cognizant of the fact that we are all the heirs to a rabbinic Judaism which developed primarily in the Diaspora over the last 1,800 years.

Nevertheless, I am profoundly distressed by the realization that those of us who choose now to remain in "exile" will be denying ourselves the opportunity to participate in the great new challenge confronting the Jewish people--to create a more perfect state, a more ethical society, expressive of the deepest values of Jewish law and thought. We are denying ourselves a voice in the formative stages of a process that will shape the next 2,000 years of Jewish history.

Three factors have powerfully undermined Jewish particularity in America: the open society, the value of material pleasure, and Jewish ignorance. The first two are not likely to change, and, therefore, the threat to Jewish continuity for the majority will not abate. The third factor, Jewish ignorance, is subject to some amelioration, and, therefore, there is some hope of retaining at least some portion of our people.

The approach to Jewish survival through Jewish education is not simple. Jewish education consists of the transmission of data, of skills in the acquisition and analysis of those data, and of the spiritual beliefs and values which make the prior two worth pursuing and achieving. My experience is that even in the modern Orthodox community, there is a serious dearth of teachers who can convey the spiritual significance of Jewish knowledge to adolescents. That is why the year in Israel after high school has become such a vital element in the educational process for our children. There, they discover the wholeness of faith within an Orthodox life lived in the real world, and all the data and skills which they had previously acquired take on real urgency and value.

The broader Jewish community has also discovered the power of a trip to Israel, even severed from a foundation in Jewish data and skills. But I do not believe that its impact will be deep and lasting without them. Likewise, the community has discovered the power in the transmission of Jewish data and skills, and is taking seriously the need for a vast network of Jewish day schools. But if the teachers in those schools fail to provide even a sustaining level of Jewish spiritual belief, the effect will, I believe, remain very shallow and we will not see the hoped-for contribution to stemming the tide of intermarriage and assimilation.

The Reform movement has been engaged in a lengthy experiment in historical reversion. Returning, as it were, to the end of the prophetic period, Reform Jews ask what Judaism would have looked like had it not turned to law as its primary means of religious expression. They have created an alternative which, with the adoption of the belief that Jewish identity can be determined by patrilineal descent (more accurately, by toying with nonlinearity), has now given up the ghost of normativeness. I see the Conservative movement as riven between those who would join Reform in its antinomianism, in practice if not in theory, and those who insist that the reversion of the Conservative movement be only to the end of the talmudic period (ca. 500

C.E.), thereby accepting talmudic law but reserving the right to modify or reinterpret any post-talmudic accretions.

The divisions within Orthodoxy are absolutely minor, albeit ideologically fascinating, as compared with the huge divide between the normative and non-normative versions of Judaism currently in the marketplace of ideas. Does Judaism command, or only desire; does it create a community with common duties or only one with common voluntary practices? Almost everything else is a matter of social convenience or institutional competition or disagreement about whose rabbi is more charismatic or more tolerant of the latest deviance.

Jewish religious unity has gone the way of the dodo bird. The question now is whether Jewish peoplehood will be able to survive the next round of the "Who is a Jew?" controversy. Will the pluralism of Diaspora Jewry be able to tolerate and encompass even the non-pluralism of Israeli Jewry? I suspect that sooner rather than later the answer will be no, with deleterious consequences for both communities.

Having previously omitted my response to the question about Jewish messianism, I can now confidently indicate that messianic arrival is the most likely circumstance for a really large-scale revival of Judaism in America. Now for other, less likely, scenarios: a severe economic depression could cause a resurgence of anti-Semitism and the emergence of a powerful movement of Christian fundamentalist proselytization, which could promote both emigration to Israel and Jewish particularism; or, MTV might undergo a spiritual awakening and replace the Material Girl with videos of the Orthodox singers Mordecai teen David and Avraham Fried. Well, I guess I'll put my money on messianic arrival.

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David R. Blumenthal

I TRUST IN God because God is a living presence in my life. I experience God in prayer--in joy, in fear, in power, and in admitting and asking for my own innermost needs. I feel God's presence as deeply personal. I am embraced, judged, and listened to by God. The liturgy helps; I use it even when I am not "inspired." There are stretches of time which are wilderness, silence, being separated from God's presence. But always I come back, I return to God.

I also experience God in nature. Suddenly I see the creative power beyond what I perceive--in different seasons, when walking, when driving. I recite the blessing over natural phenomena, or I just thank God often during the year.

I also feel God's presence in moments of human contact--with students, with friends, frequently with family, sometimes even with strangers. Much of human contact is routine, some of it is abrasive. But I have become accustomed to stopping myself and looking at the other--in wonder--and that returns me to God.

I sense God, too, when studying and teaching sacred texts. The personal and transpersonal presence of God, in all its forms and varieties, springs out at me from the pages. Religious texts are religious because they embody the presence of God; the rest is art, literature.

For me, God is "He." That is the way I experience this presence. This "He" often acts like a "She," if such characterizations can be stereotyped--compassionate, loving, comforting, embracing--but I feel God as He. When I talk about humans, I always use inclusive language. In writing about God, I also use inclusive language so as to include women. But when I talk to God in prayer, I use male-gendered language. It is fuller, more complete, more powerful--for me. Others sense and worship God impersonally, using abstract language and metaphors of detachment. Still others sense and worship God as She, utilizing female-gendered or mixed-gendered language. Those of other religions experience and worship God in all the different modes of human understanding and expression. There is no right and wrong way to experience, talk about, and address God. I understand, and support, my fellow worshipers.

I also sense God in history. Every trip to Israel, especially to Jerusalem and the Western Wall, brings God's presence to me. On Yom Ha'atzmaut (Israel's independence day) and Yom Yerushalayim (commemorating the liberation of Jerusalem in June 1967) I will not, as a matter of principle, pray in a synagogue which does not recite Hallel, the festival psalms of praise. I also do not like to pray in synagogues that do not routinely recite the prayers for the state of Israel and for the Israel Defense Force. I try to attend community commemorations of Israel's independence and its war dead, and I include the state of Israel and its defense forces in the grace after meals. I am embarrassed that I do not own property in the land given us by God and revitalized by the Jewish people.

The Holocaust was a terrible problem for me, which is why I wrote Facing the Abusing God: a Theology of

Protest (1993). In it, I studied some texts, explored the domain of psychotherapy with adult survivors of child abuse, reached some very unpleasant but true conclusions, and made some suggestions for confronting God in prayer on the subject of the Holocaust. I use this liturgy twice a week and on Yom Kippur. It is frightening to confront God, in thought and in prayer, but, since truth and mercy are essential to our relationship, I say the words of anger and protest. This has brought me closer to God; it has strengthened my faith.

The rest is commentary. The Torah is God's communication to us. It is the structure of God's relationship to us, and ours to God; that is the meaning of covenant. I accept the view that teaches that God's presence appeared powerfully on Sinai to all who were there, but that that appearance was given form by Moses and interpreted by subsequent authorities. Some commandments, mitzvot, are more binding than others. The tradition has always known this, though it sometimes teaches that all mitzvot are alike in value.

God chose the Jewish people for this revelation, though God has made the divine presence known to others and is in covenant with all humanity, as the tradition teaches. This chosenness is for closeness and intimacy; it is not a license for superiority or inferiority. It does, however, excite jealousy; there is not much remedy for that, except understanding and humility.

I accept, too, the teaching that says that God's presence gives meaning to our personal and collective lives and that, in the end, humanity will live in a better world. We need to work toward that world, but we cannot bring it about by ourselves. God will have to act to bring the messiah who, in turn, will inaugurate this better time in ways we scarcely comprehend.

The most serious challenge to Jewish belief, secular and religious, is the shadow of the Holocaust. The question of how God allowed it to happen leads to a denial of God's participation in our national life. For some, this is conscious; for others, it is just below the surface. But it is there in the attitude of resolute self-help, in the widespread secularism and assimilation, in the determined preoccupation with Torah, mitzvot, proper belief, and religious politics, and in the conspiracy of silence that surrounds the very question.

The Holocaust, as it projects its shadow toward the future, also obliges us to a hyper-vigilance which often distorts our political and social perspectives in areas as varied as the security of the state of Israel, the need for peace in the Middle East, the depth of the threat of anti-Semitism, and the need to participate in, or be separate from, the non-Jewish world. I do not see any great stimulus to renewal of the presence of God in our personal and national lives, though there are efforts by small groups here and there. Nor do I expect a large-scale revival of a God-centered Judaism anywhere.

Jewish unity, religious or otherwise, is a fiction belied by reality and Jewish humor. What is at stake is the ability to form coalitions to achieve carefully considered common goals. In matters of security and peace, despite the 1996 elections in Israel, there will be a great deal of consensus. In matters of culture and identity, there will not be much agreement. Coalitions in these areas will be difficult to form.

Modernity comprises both an impulse to an increased demand for recognition of individual and group rights and a thrust toward authority and centralized control of belief and praxis. The tension between these two components will put stress on all forms of Jewish identity, as it does on non-Jewish identity. Further, the increasing level of communication will create a "crowding" effect in modern life, which will also increase the tensions of identity- and community-formation. These processes are not specifically Jewish and need to be addressed by modern society in general.

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Marshall J. Breger

THE CENTRAL divide in Judaism, as a religion based on law, is between those who accept the normative authority (literally the "yoke") of the law (halakhah) and those who view Jewish law as some kind of historical archive for spiritual inspiration. To that extent Orthodoxy and some part of the Conservative movement fall on one side of the divide and Reform and a larger part of the Conservative movement on the other. That is, or at least should be, the defining normative dispute in Judaism. The many institutional distinctions among the various formal divisions--Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, Reconstructionist--pale by comparison.

As one who does accept this "yoke," I focus more on what the law requires than on the ups and downs of my personal relationship with God, although I do not doubt His presence either in history or in our lives. But one cannot treat the law as a good in itself. And in that regard, Orthodoxy, I fear, often fails to understand that observance of the law's letter without understanding its spirit is not enough. Hiddur mitzvah, the goal of making a mitzvah "beautiful," is less a matter of aesthetics or of money than of spirit. An entire strain of

19th-century yeshiva education devoted itself to the teaching of mussar--ethical behavior--and admonished its adherents to do better in their treatment of their fellow man.

In that regard, it pains me that in some Jewish circles the reaction against political liberalism and universalism has been so fierce that a species of selfishness--a focus on Jewish particularity--has become a virtue. At the far end of the continuum we find the now-infamous assertion of Rabbi Ginsburgh of Kiryat Arba (in Israel) that Jewish blood is more valuable in God's eyes than the blood of Gentiles. Judaism, however, requires us to reject even the more "reasonable" articulation of this strain of Jewish particularity: that we concentrate on Jewish suffering to the exclusion of that of the Gentiles. We cannot, we must not, give up on our responsibility for tikkun olam, the repair of the world, for through that effort will the messiah come. Indeed, that responsibility is a halakhic responsibility--i.e., part of our own religious particularity.

In the next century, Jewish religious life in America will, I believe, tend toward two poles--a robust confident Orthodoxy (still a minority) concerned with halakhah and a spiritually energized Reform. Conservative Judaism, once seen as the authentically American Judaism, will find itself increasingly under pressure.

As an observant Jew I cannot but understand the creation of the state of Israel as "the dawn of our redemption." Yet, and I say this with some degree of sadness, I suspect that American Judaism in the next century will be less focused on Israel. The miracle is no longer considered a miracle by most American Jews. Part of this is due to the very success of Israel in becoming a normalized state--a nation like other nations. In the period of the British Mandate over Palestine a group of poets shed their Judaism to call themselves Canaanites--their goal was to draw deep upon the values of the historical inhabitants rather than of Diaspora Judaism. The Canaanites were spurned by the Yishuv, the Jewish community in Mandatory Palestine, not because they were avant-garde but because they tried not to be Jewish. In those less sophisticated times you could not be a Palestinian Jew without being, in some sense, Jewish as well.

But today's Israelis are worldly-wise. In the post-Zionist demimonde of North Tel Aviv and Savyon, the goal is to drink deep from Western materialism, not from Judaism. Thus I see an Israel that is less Jewish and an American Jewry that in return maintains on occasion a discreet distance from what for the last 50 years has been the center of Jewish existence.

The distance will be increased by the likely inability of the Orthodox establishment in Israel to accept religious pluralism in Israel. The greater the pressure for religious conformity there, the less engaged non-Orthodox Jews in the Diaspora will be with the Jewish state. Only the existential threats to Israel's existence have kept this incipient crisis at bay.

In its central feature, Jewish law differs dramatically from the perspective of modern secularism and modern liberalism. The intellectual thought of the 20th century is focused on the celebration (indeed the glorification) of the individual; all is subsumed by the goal of personal liberation. The view of Judaism is markedly different. In rabbinic Judaism there is rarely any reference to rights; the operative terms are duty and responsibility. (It is less that one has a right to an unobstructed view from a window in his building; rather, his neighbors have the responsibility not to restrict his view.) Nor is there much focus on feelings--one's duty is to practice the commandments. This focus on both duty and responsibility puts Judaism inextricably at odds with almost all species of modernism and political liberalism.

The irony is obvious. Jews have been the spear-carriers of modernism in both culture and politics; they are more likely to be counted among the "worldly-wise" than almost any other religious group. Most American Jews, I hazard to say, would not even recognize the language of faith. For them, Judaism is at best a culture, at worst a form of nostalgia: it is not a spiritual faith. For American Judaism as a religion to prosper in the next century it must transform the culture of American Jews--no easy task.

Since the coming of emancipation in the 18th and 19th centuries, the Jewish community has had to struggle daily with the corrosive effects of modernity and assimilation. Nonetheless, we have muddled through. A little more than a century ago, Rabbi Maurice Harris of Chicago pointed out that "our distinctive characteristics are going, one by one: we are becoming more and more like our neighbors and less distinguished from them.... This is the age of freedom," he declaimed, "are we Jews ready for it? Are we brave enough to walk alone? Can we trust ourselves?"

We are still here and still asking the same question. Perhaps that is what it means to be a "chosen people."

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Nina Beth Cardin

BELIEF IN God motivates all that I do. Not that I do not wonder about the existence of God--I do. And not that I do not puzzle over the nature of God--I do that, too. But in truth, on a daily basis these wonders and doubts do not overly occupy my mind, for I have resigned myself to living outside the Garden, to being a true daughter of Eve, to bearing--and promoting--the blessed curse of desiring, pursuing, yet being unable to possess divine knowledge.

Still, I need and thrive on my belief in God. I believe in this belief because it is this belief in God, even more than the existence of God, that motivates me, that makes a claim on me. This is not blasphemy. Judaism itself realizes that "all is in the hands of God except the fear of God." It is not the existence of God alone that animates the world, but our response to that belief.

My belief in God pulls me into relationship: it gives me a deep, rich memory that I share with others; a path to travel staked out by those who came before, with enough room for many to walk together; and a compass to help me go where we have not been before. It does not afford me the wisdom to make a brief for God. I am no more able than you to answer in the name of God those who lie in their beds, sick with disease, and wonder why this is happening to them. But I am able, indeed commanded, to sit by their beds, to tell them stories of others who sat by the beds of others who were sick, to offer them comfort.

All this springs from "Torah"--the narrative, law, wisdom, and ways of the Jewish people. Torah is the Jewish people's response, or midrash, to our experience of God. Since the Torah's genesis is divine, Torah too is divine. Since the encounter between God and us is continuing, so Torah is continuing. That does not mean, however, a leveling of all "Torah." The source, the original, the Five Books of Moses and the Prophets and Writings that follow, stand unique and inviolable, even the parts that trouble us. They are the foundation and so they must remain.

In response to the above, I do mitzvot. That is, I assume that I will observe a mitzvah unless and until a compelling reason argues against it. I do not assume that I will not observe a mitzvah until it proves itself compelling to me. To do the latter is to privilege American secular society over Judaism; to do the former is to privilege Jewish culture over American society.

I believe that God chooses the Jewish people in the same way that a loving parent chooses a child: every child is endowed with unique qualities that he or she alone can bring to the world. A loving parent will choose to encourage the child in accordance with the child's abilities. This is both good for the child and good for the world. Jews have the unique gifts of Torah, of the prophets, of our rich textual, legal, liturgical, ritual, and spiritual traditions. We have the gift of believing that we are partners with God in this world; we have the gift of endless (if sometimes shaky) hope; we have the gift of community. We have a vision of a world without need, without strife, of a world that is all Sabbath. We have a map that guides our path toward this vision, with station stops along the way (mitzvot and holidays) that nourish us so that we do not give up.

I never knew a time absent the Holocaust. I never knew a time without Israel. I learned about them as I learned about the aleph-bet, the stories of creation, what the Sabbath means, how to say the blessing over wine. You might as well ask how Passover has shaped my religious identity, or the Sabbath influenced my faith. As the Holocaust and Israel are increasingly woven into the full cloth of Judaism, it is harder to tease these strands apart. They have not so much affected me as become a part of me.

If these strands are not separate, neither are they complete. What we experience is just the first creation. What we make of these experiences, the way we speak of them and remember them, is the second. We must make of our reactions a creation. That is a humbling and holy task.

Which aspects of America offer the greatest stimulus to Jewish belief? Freedom, science, knowledge, democracy, equality, prosperity, mobility,

technology. Which pose the most serious challenges? Freedom, science, knowledge, democracy, equality, prosperity, mobility, technology.

I fear for Jewish unity. I fear for it when I hear that good, committed, educated, liberal Jews say they would rather forgo a day-school education for their children than send them to an Orthodox day school because of its nonegalitarian beliefs. I fear for it when I hear that material which includes my name accompanied by my title cannot or will not be distributed in certain places and by certain groups. I fear for our unity when I see that acknowledgment of the legitimacy of any form of non-Orthodox Judaism in Israel is threatened. I fear for it when I hear the growing hostility on both sides and the diminishing desire or hope for unity. I fear for it when in almost every major Jewish community there are two rabbinical organizations, one for the Orthodox rabbis and one for all the others. And despite a few oases of cross-denominational association, which we dare not mention for fear that exposure will jeopardize their continued association, I fear that the gap is widening.

There are pockets of hope, however. Perhaps one most strongly felt is in the single arena that is the eternal leveler: sickness and dying. Bikkur holim groups, which visit the sick in hospitals; hospital and community chaplains; the growing number of hospice chaplains--many of these conduct their work in a pan-denominational way. We should accept this teaching from the ill and the dying, and respond.

As Jews, we always see prospects. Truly we are witnessing a revival in Judaism. Some have suggested that there are more Jews studying Torah in the world today than there were in all of the academies and all the yeshivas in the course of Jewish history combined. Certainly, American Jews contribute mightily to these numbers. As the wave of spiritual renewal rises throughout the world today, the spiritual quest within Judaism will rise with it. Our task is to be diligent without being over-anxious. Perhaps we were always meant to be a small group. And the real question is not just revival, but revival for what?

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David G. Dalin

I believe in a personal God Who listens to our prayers, whether or not He answers them to our satisfaction. I believe divine revelation to be a fundamental principle of Judaism, which I unapologetically affirm. Revelation, as I understand it, is the traditional belief that God has directly communicated with human beings, revealing to them truths about the world and its nature. I accept as a matter of religious faith the biblical claim that God communicated with Moses directly at Sinai, and in so doing made His divine will and commandments known in the wilderness.

While I believe that revelation is a central principle of Judaism, I differ from the Orthodox position in that I do not believe that revelation was confined to Sinai or to the biblical period alone. I find it difficult to accept the notion that God's revelation has been restricted to one time or place, or to one historical epoch. Rather, it has been a continuous process, reflected in the teachings of the prophets and the rabbis of the Mishnah, as well as in the thought and writings of a variety of Jewish thinkers and exegetes, medieval and modern, who have shaped Jewish religious thought and rabbinic interpretation throughout the centuries, including our own.

I accept the binding nature of many, but not all, of the commandments, or mitzvot. I have always found especially compelling Abraham Joshua Heschel's insight that "Judaism is based on a minimum of revelation and a maximum of interpretation." Divine revelation since Sinai, I believe, continues (in part) in the form of new interpretations of the Torah, and reevaluations of the mitzvot contained therein by the rabbis of each generation. Not all of the commandments have been binding for all people, in all lands, at all periods of Jewish history. Thus, for example, many of the 613 commandments were applicable only in the land of Israel or in the time of the Temple. In this belief, of course, I am not alone: Jewish exegetes since Saadia Gaon in the 10th century have distinguished among the commandments, suggesting that some may be more binding than others. Inevitably, in each generation, religious Jews have done (and will continue to do) likewise.

Since the dawn of modernity, much thought and debate have been devoted to defending or rejecting the doctrine of Israel's election. I confess that I have never been able to sustain much empathy for the arguments against chosenness that have been so central to much of liberal Jewish religious thought (and polemics) from Spinoza to, in this century, Mordecai M. Kaplan, the founder of Reconstructionism. An affirmation of the idea of chosenness--of Israel's election by God--is a central tenet of my religious faith as a Jew. Over the years, I have always considered (and continue to regard) the Hebrew blessing thanking God "Who has chosen us from all peoples by giving us His Torah" a profoundly important and meaningful part of our traditional Jewish liturgy, and one that should never be deleted from the worship service. For 20th-century Jews, the wonder of Jewish history itself--the historic miracle of continuity and survival--should justify a continuing belief in the chosenness of the Jewish people.

The Holocaust has played less of a role in shaping my religious faith and identity than has the state of Israel. Indeed, in terms of my own personal religious evolution, Jerusalem has been a source of more compelling symbolism and spiritual meaning than has Auschwitz. Against all odds, the Jewish people did survive the Holocaust and our generation has been privileged to witness the long-promised "ingathering of the exiles." As the religious philosopher Eliezer Berkovitz has reminded us, the Holocaust was not all of Jewish history, nor was it the final chapter.

The existence of Israel has profoundly influenced my faith, identity, and observance. In recent years, observance of the new Jewish holiday of Yom Ha'atzmaut, Israel's independence day, has become of heightened religious significance for me. So, too, has the fact that for centuries, in their daily prayers, religious Jews reaffirmed their abiding belief in an eventual return to Zion, confident that one day this belief would be translated into historical reality. As their spiritual heir, I share their faith and their confidence in

God's continuing presence in Jewish history, and His transcendent commitment to the Jewish people's survival.

One serious challenge to the free exercise of Jewish belief in America has been posed by the triumph of the legal doctrine of strict separationism that has dominated church-state thought and jurisprudence, both in America generally and within the Jewish community. I do not share the belief espoused by most liberal Jews that religious freedom is most secure where religion and state are strictly separated. On the contrary: I remain convinced that a political climate uninformed by religious beliefs and values undermines the position of religiously observant Jews, and of other communities of faith, within American society. Indeed, the triumph of strict separationism as a legal doctrine, with its promise to expunge all religious belief and symbols from the public arena, may actually infringe upon the free exercise of religion so cherished by American Jews. Thus, in their own self-interest, I believe American Jews should seek and applaud judicial decisions that permit far more, rather than less, accommodation of religion, and that would make it easier for observant Jews to uphold the tenets and practices of their faith.

Today more than ever, I am deeply worried by some of the interdenominational confrontations and disagreements that threaten the religious unity of American Jewry. Thus, for example, the refusal of a growing number of Orthodox rabbis to participate in Jewish communal organizations or forums which include non-Orthodox rabbis, or to recognize the legitimacy of non-Orthodox conversions, or of non-Orthodox Judaism itself, has contributed to an atmosphere of discord and antagonism. So too with the understandably acrimonious debate over the question of Jewish religious identity: in its unprecedented abandonment of the matrilineal principle in 1983, the Reform movement broke with centuries of rabbinic law and tradition, which held that only children born of a Jewish mother were to be considered Jews. Reform and Reconstructionist support for patrilineal descent, being radically incompatible with traditional Orthodox and Conservative definitions of "who is a Jew," threatens the religious unity of the American Jewish community as never before.

Still, despite my fears about the state of Jewish pluralism, I see at least some evidence to suggest the prospect of an authentic, and potentially large-scale, Jewish revival in America. Over the past decade and more we have witnessed the dramatic growth of the baal teshuvah movement of returnees to Judaism, which has revitalized all segments of the community. In recent years, the intensification of Jewish religious observance and education has been evident across the entire denominational spectrum, in homes, synagogues, and seminaries. Day schools and day-school enrollments, moreover, have multiplied. This phenomenal growth, especially outside metropolitan New York, has affected Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform Judaism alike, producing a new generation of Jewish youth and young adults who are better educated and more observant than their parents. If the day-school movement continues to grow, it will offer the chance of a transformative long-term impact on the religious and spiritual life of American Judaism.

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Elliot N. Dorff

Human beings have no unmediated knowledge; we rather have to construct our conceptions of things on the basis of the experiences we have. The more a given concept fits the sense data which it is trying to describe, the more adequate that concept is to our experience and the closer it is to what we can know of the truth.

I believe in a personal God because I find that construction of reality to be most adequate in describing and explaining my experience. Unlike Spinoza, who saw human notions of personality as the product of our limited intelligence, I think that personality is part of ultimate metaphysical reality, and so I need to build personality into my conception of God if it is to be adequate. I believe, then, in a personal God Who interacts with us individually and collectively, as much female as male in characteristics. The siddur, the Jewish prayer book, has been especially helpful to me in formulating my belief because it identifies the kinds of normal human experiences, and the reactions to them, which can serve as the motivation and ground of faith.

As a teenager growing up in Milwaukee, I was president of a number of organizations and active in yet others. My decision to observe the Sabbath and kashrut at age fifteen, motivated by a series of discussions at the Conservative movement's Camp Ramah, therefore came at a real social price. I disappeared from my friends' world from sunset Friday to sunset Saturday, and I ordered salads and fish when they ordered a Big Boy. It was from that experience that I learned what it means to be commanded. I also learned a form of observing the commandments which still made it possible for me to live in the broader world.

Jewish religious law is authoritative for me both as the practice of my people and as God's revelation. Our understanding of what God wants of us, however, continually develops, a position which the rabbis of the Talmud held, too. We must determine the content of Jewish law, however, as a community, not solely as individuals, for otherwise Jewish law loses its coherence and authority. The evolving nature of our community and of our understanding of revelation explains why we need to make adjustments in Jewish law, dropping or reinterpreting some of the practices in the tradition and adding others.

Jewish law, properly understood, deals not only with rituals, important as they are, but with the moral issues which face us. Thus in recent years I have written responsa, or legal opinions, for the Conservative movement's Committee on Jewish Law and Standards, on issues like infertility, end-of-life dilemmas, and privacy in cyberspace, as well as a Rabbinic Letter on Intimate Relations.

When called in synagogue to recite the blessings for a reading from the Torah, I say, with the tradition, "Blessed are You, God . . . Who has chosen us from all peoples," but without any of the disdain for other religions and cultures which that phrase connotes for some Jews who use it. On the contrary, I have been heavily involved in interfaith dialogue, and that is only possible if one respects others and is even prepared to learn from them.

At the same time, I have no doubt about my own Jewish identity, both because it is mine, the heritage of my ancestors, and also because, after conscientiously studying the other secular and religious ways in which people throughout the world have thought about their lives and lived them, I find Judaism to be incredibly wise. Like Amos (3:2), being a chosen people means, for me, that we are called to special responsibility to lead exemplary lives and to improve the world.

Underlying this stance is a constant recognition that human beings are not omniscient and that therefore any understanding of God's nature and of what God wants of us, including my own, will inevitably be a partial one, open to error and improvement. I believe strongly in Judaism's "fix" on life; but I simultaneously believe that people who hold other beliefs can be intelligent and morally sensitive and can even teach me how to deepen my own Jewish faith.

Jews must strive to improve the world; that is our mission. Non-Jews may share in that mission, and ultimately the messianic era will be one in which Jews and non-Jews cooperate in making this world ideal. Modern communications and transportation have made it abundantly clear that any messianic view which speaks of Jews alone is, to that extent, unrealistic and inadequate; we are all indeed part of a global village. For that reason I prefer Micah's vision of pluralism (4:1-5) over Isaiah's monotheism (2:1-4).

The Holocaust is undoubtedly a most egregious example of the depths to which humans can sink, but it does not, despite the arguments suggested to the contrary, pose a philosophical problem for Judaism different from other examples of human depravity. For free will to mean anything, bad uses of it must be possible. A small child dying of leukemia is, in fact, philosophically more difficult to reconcile with a benign God than is the Holocaust. I ache for victims of natural and human evil, and I need to work to eliminate them both.

I am privileged to live during the time of the Jewish return to the state of Israel. I glory in its Jewish creativity and in the goad Israel provides for Diaspora Jews to enrich their own Jewish lives. I do not, however, think that Israel is the only place where Jewish life can be lived; Israel and the Diaspora both can and must teach each other. The greatest gift which American Judaism can impart to Israel is a sense of pluralism in Jewish expression.

The greatest American stimuli to Jewish belief are the revival of serious religious belief among Christians and the increasing recognition of the emptiness of a life lived exclusively on a secular plane. The greatest challenges arise, ironically, from the degree to which Jews have been accepted in America, to the point of intermarriage, and from the Jewish emphasis on education which has led Jews to postpone marriage, often until it is too late to have children. We need to invest much more effort and money in Jewish education and in cross-denominational efforts to enable young Jews to meet each other, and we must provide the encouragement and child support for them to have three or four children per couple if we are to survive as a people and as a faith.

The denominations in American Judaism are a healthy expression of pluralism. As the ancient homilists of the Midrash recognized, each person standing at Sinai heard God in his or her unique way, and we are not all alike today, either. We dare not, however, let difference translate into division, for that will make it impossible to accomplish our common Jewish ends. The community should remove monetary support from those factions which refuse to cooperate with the rest of us.

Will there be a large-scale revival of Judaism in America? Yes, but only if we wisely cultivate the many and

diverse expressions of interest in evidence now, even among those who have intermarried. Most resources should be devoted to helping people seriously interested in Judaism deepen their faith and that of their children, but we need to remain open as well to those gingerly making their way back into Judaism.

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David Ellenson

For my ancestors, the truth of Jewish tradition was self-evident. In contrast, my readings in the social sciences make me aware that my Judaism is in large measure the product of arbitrary forces. There is self-recognition on my part that my faith and identity as a Jew are embedded in culture, and also that my beliefs are to a great extent the products of subjective choices.

This self-awareness robs me of the dogmatic certainty I imagine was possessed by most of my forebears and some of my contemporary co-religionists. In light of this, I could never state my own personal beliefs with either the precision or confidence the first set of questions in this symposium appears to demand. Simultaneously, I feel challenged and moved to respond as a Jew to their stark simplicity. They make me quite conscious of how visceral my faith and identity as a Jew are despite my acknowledgment that reality is by and large the product of social construction.

I see my Jewishness as a fortuitous given that defines my human condition. It is how I have been placed into the world. The narrative of Judaism provides the framework within which I situate my life. The Jewish story is my story. Its tale informs how I approach and relate to the world. It tells me that the world is unredeemed and causes me not only to distrust but to proclaim as false and dangerous claims made by any individual or group that a single person is the messiah. Instead, the thrust of my messianism is found in the Torah's command that I shall not oppress or vex the stranger. I was a stranger in Egypt and know the pain and distress that mark the stranger's heart. I am therefore obligated as a Jew to work for the repair of the human condition.

I do not attach metaphysical significance to either the Holocaust or the establishment of the state of Israel. I hear no 614th commandment emanating from Auschwitz that implores me, as the theologian Emil L. Fackenheim once put it, not to hand Hitler posthumous victories. Nor can I recite that phrase in our liturgy which asserts that the state of Israel constitutes the beginning of the flowering of our redemption. Such supernatural readings of the seminal events of the modern Jewish experience rub against my naturalistic grain.

Nevertheless, I know that my life as a Jew is never an autonomous one. Judaism for me is never a personal matter, closed and individual. In my thoughts, in my feelings of joy and pain, I find myself connected with the rest of my people. As a result, both the Holocaust and the state of Israel are omnipresent events which provide many of the contours within which I understand and live my life. I am a Jew for whom to be means to belong to the people Israel. My Judaism is carnal--embedded in community and land.

At the same time, I do know that the tradition is congruent with my deepest needs and sentiments as a person. I need the fellowship of others. The Jewish calendar bestows meaning upon my existence. It provides linkages to others and in so doing grants stability and order to my life.

While the rituals of Judaism which help me pass through the stages and seasons of life are indispensable, I could never identify which elements of the Torah are the gifts of divinity. After all, I do believe that our tradition and our symbols--mediated as they are through human agency--are at best fragile and tentative gropings for the reality of the divine whose presence they purport to represent in the world. They point toward, but could never fully contain, God, Whose fullness must be beyond all words and rituals. The observances associated with Torah nevertheless inexplicably provide me with momentary glimpses of the divine. At times I perceive what others have labeled signals of transcendence in the interactions and fellowship provided by the rhythms of life within the orbit of this people Israel and its community. Such experiences remind me that there is a mystery and infinity that lie at the heart of religion and culture. This is my personal faith.

To assess the contemporary religious scene in America I return to the social sciences. I take seriously the notion of secularization as a concept for understanding what is occurring to Jews in the United States today. By the term secularization, I mean the process whereby religion comes to be confined to certain distinct precincts of life. Religion does not completely disappear in such a situation. Instead, for many, religion becomes irrelevant. That is, it neither guides nor directs a majority, or even a substantial segment, of the diffuse commitments and values that mark the lives of most persons today. Ours is a community that has been shaped and informed by this process.

As American Jews, we are highly acculturated and largely welcomed in this society. The majority of Jews in this country pursue lives and affirm general values that make us virtually indistinguishable from the general public. Our lives no longer move from a Jewish center to the larger world, and the *Gemeinschaften* of yore are a thing of the past. This does not mean that Judaism has no place in the lives of most American Jews. However, that presence is episodic. Participation in the community is all too often confined exclusively to circumscribed moments surrounding the life cycle.

This indicates that Judaism--sadly, in my opinion--constitutes at best a residual commitment among a majority of American Jews. I believe that such a Judaism lacks the power and substance to transmit Jewish values, culture, and identity to subsequent generations. I am, therefore, pessimistic about the durability of Judaism in the lives of most American Jews. It is why I do not predict a large-scale revival of Judaism among the Jews of our country.

At the same time, I recognize that there has been a major revitalization of Jewish religious, intellectual, and cultural life in this nation. Jewish identity and commitment in America have not simply been subject to atrophy and death despite the relentless and ubiquitous pressures of the modern world and its culture. Commitment to Jewish study and religious observance are increasing among significant pockets of our people. The same conditions I bemoaned in the previous paragraph for dissolving the force of Jewish tradition in the contemporary setting do not serve as a solvent alone. In a world all too often rootless and unanchored, Judaism will continue to offer the enduring power of community and spirituality to those who choose it. Judaism can and will flourish for those Jews in this world of freedom.

All this leads me to conclude that a minority of Jews have the capacity to sustain themselves and even strengthen their commitments to Jewish religion, culture, and identity despite the tendencies of the majority. The most significant division in the contemporary Jewish community is therefore between that minority of Jews for whom Judaism is at the center of their lives and the majority for whom it is peripheral at best. There will of course be ongoing and growing disputes between Orthodox Jews and members of the more liberal Jewish denominations. I do not expect this to diminish in the near future. Nor is this unprecedented in Jewish history.

On the other hand, my analysis does not lead me to exaggerate notions of divisions among Reform and Conservative Jews. While elite elements in each of the movements surely have different understandings regarding the nature of Judaism, the Jews who inhabit these movements are simply too homogenous to make the divisions a cause for ongoing communal concern.

Throughout history, Jews and Judaism have been tested. We are, as the late historian Simon Rawidowicz put it, "an ever-dying people." We in America have not escaped this eternal Jewish condition. Our community and faith are challenged now as before. Yet our people has endured. Our culture and identity have proved resilient in the past. I expect no less in the future.

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Michael Fishbane

I am in my innermost core a religious person, whose spiritual sensibilities are shaped by Judaism. At the center of this religiosity is a theological perspective that senses in the manifold vitality of being (as experienced within my self, and in the world of persons and things) the infinite formulations of the divine Name, and that feels compelled (even commanded) to respond to this vitality as a spiritual task whose ends are sanctification and service. The human naming of this divine vitality is given through tradition and interpretation. As a Jew, I live fundamentally within the framework of Jewish forms of naming and their possibilities. But I am also a person whose humanity is affected by the forms that this vitality has taken throughout history. These, too, give the divine a human image.

I thus look on the world with two eyes--the eye of faith and faithfulness, and the eye of difference and doubt; but I act upon it with one body. The eye of faith hopes that the language and actions of Judaism will lead to a life of sanctity and sanctification, while personal and historical verification of Judaism's spiritual path keeps me faithful to its ongoing values. By contrast, the eye of difference and doubt knows that there are other values, religions, and possibilities under heaven. It keeps the eye of faith honest and spiritually humble. I therefore live in spiritual commitment to God as revealed through historical Judaism, and with consciousness of intellectual and religious alternatives, great or small. This is not a split life, but one that tries to live the religious possibilities of Judaism with perspective. My body is the vehicle of this enactment, enhancing or distorting the expressions of divine vitality through human words and deeds. Judaism is a challenge and a guide on my way.

The term "belief" with respect to God is not religiously real to me, being too static and ideational. I understand theology in more relational terms, and am thus more concerned with standing firmly and responsively before the living God--Whose presence is the changing face of persons and things. The dynamic connection that happens at these moments of awareness and commitment is covenantal in a root sense, demanding both hearing and doing. Sinai is for me the paradigmatic expression of such meetings between God's presence and persons; and Israel's collective response, "We shall do and hear" (Exodus 24:7), is emblematic of the silent or spoken commitments made in relationship to God. These commitments (accumulated through tradition and personal experience) express my values and obligations. In my understanding, faithfulness to God's reality includes the struggle to keep these values primary in the storm of events. Sinai thus brings the nameless vitality of God into the moral sphere, demanding attentive responsibility.

For me, then, the Torah and the commandments are from heaven; but their authority and formulation rest with the leaders, interpreters, and members of the community over time. Thus all is subject to the greatness and perversity, or to the fidelities and infidelities, of the human imagination. Moreover, for me, while a voice spoke at Sinai, not everything was heard or done at that time. Thus I understand the phrase "We shall do and hear" as an assent in the present and a commitment to the future, as a commitment to tradition and the extension of the voice of Sinai through interpretation. For while the Torah is immutable, the tradition is not, and must responsibly guard and shape the holy spirit in its keeping.

I try to be faithful to the whole law and, in the doing, raise its abstract duties to direct and personal commandments. But I am not always successful. I also try to be faithful to the spirit of the law, and counteract problematic developments or applications by recourse to its own highest principles. But I am not always successful, and some rules move off center. The voice of God is therefore not always present to me in the tradition. Indeed, that voice is often heard from elsewhere--in the texts and expressions of other religions, for example; but also in art and much more. I try to bring this hearing into Jewish tradition. But the main task is to stay on a spiritual path.

In its crude forms, the notion of Israel's chosenness can lead to vulgar triumphalism and self-idolatry. This in my view is a perversion of the holy spirit. Nevertheless I recite this notion in religious worship, where it is bound to positive values and obligations. The paradox must be withstood, for at its highest reach a theology of chosenness articulates a sense of divine destiny in and through the realization of certain behaviors or attitudes. For Israel and Judaism, I believe that two tasks are basic. The first is to stand firm on behalf of unity, so that differences are honored and divisiveness resisted; and the second is to stand firm against idolatry, so that self-interest and myopia do not pervert or reduce messianic ideals. In my view, true messianism must hold out against small-mindedness for God's sake. The faithful Jew feels "chosen" by these tasks.

I was born during World War II and came to religious and moral consciousness with the Holocaust and the state of Israel as pivotal historical realities. They have remained so, dominating my mind through images as much as reflective thought. Any epitomization of their effect on my life feels hollow. Perhaps honesty can only point to some enduring sensibilities shaped by these events. I thus confess, on the one hand, to an inescapable attention to the abysses within culture and human desire; the snake is coiled around the tree of knowledge with primordial guile, always. On the other hand, the existence of Israel compels my assent to the resilience of hope and a commitment to its physical embodiment. Concrete reality must be the sphere of moral and spiritual verification. As a religious person, I try to keep both matters in mind. The work of sanctification depends on it. I take the dangers and nearness of desecration very seriously.

Perhaps the climate of spiritual and moral anomie may induce some individuals to the principles and patterns of Jewish life; but I am neither impressed with nor hopeful about the ideological or social huddles that often result. A defensive spirit drains Judaism of its spiritual daring. Even more debilitating for "Jewish belief" is the erasure of anomie by thinly disguised fundamentalisms. Here, the language of faith is regularly used to justify the justifiers. I find such apologetics uninteresting.

Equally disquieting to me is technological philistinism in American life. Formatted Jewish data and their easy retrieval are no substitute for the patience and cyclical patterns of traditional learning. This shift in rhythm twists Judaism in the wind of blowhards and reduces public discourse to sermonic sound-bites. In my view, Judaism is grounded in the elemental rhythms of breathing, speaking, and reading, and in the daily patterns of light and dark, food and fellowship. Modernity conspires against this. Sanctification is meaningless in such a take-out/print-out world.

Ideological divisions affecting religious thought and practice are as old as the Bible. What is particularly new are the forms of difference affecting notions of canon, conviction, and community in contemporary American Judaism--and their increasing isolation from each other. Distinct Judaisms are forming within our midst,

responsible to different authorities. Little consensus exists on any of the fundamentals governing the religious polity (including rabbinic authority, genealogy, and rights over one's body or what it hosts). I suspect that these positions will become further ingrown and self-justifying, leaving American Judaism splintered and sectarian. I am dismayed by the prospects, yet I also try to seek out like-minded Jews for fellowship and worship. Common, nonideological projects (like study and charity) may cross certain boundaries; but I doubt that a common language or ritual will arise, and without these the future is futile.

I am a pessimistic optimist about Jewish revival in America--combining a sense of realism with the will to labor for the future; but I find the prospect of a large-scale revival simply incomprehensible. The forces sucking the spirit from Judaism are larger. Spiritual resistance is the only response, for the sake of our souls. That is work enough.

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Barry Freundel

The narrow range of physical parameters required of the universe in order to sustain life, the almost infinite intricacy of the human genome, the miracle of birth--all speak, to those willing to listen, of the presence of a heavenly hand. While many in the scientific community have turned on its head the classic argument from design, insisting that scientific description of natural phenomena banishes God from the universe, quite the opposite is true. Were God to run the universe through constant supernatural intervention, He would be the cosmic equivalent of the president of a multinational corporation who spent his time sorting the mail. Instead, the robust functioning of life and human existence so close to the edge of a scientifically much more logical nonexistence should at the very least challenge the core of anyone's disbelief.

Chosenness means what it has always meant. Our people were given a message and a mission designed to help bring a shared morality to the world. We were not asked to bring Judaism to the world, just fundamental basic morality. Certainly the need for moral guidance is everywhere evident today. This poses two significant challenges. First, we must not give up on our belief in absolute values--frankly, without values we have nothing to offer the world. Second, we are required to live by these values so that we can serve as role models in the moral enterprise of helping to weave a better life for all humankind.

No more fructifying idea exists in Jewish life than that of the messiah. From Lubavitch to Reform to Zionism (both secular and religious), the idea of radically breaking with history and creating a world far better than previously known has carried Judaism through its confrontation with modernity. Even the most politically conservative Jew knows that this world has a long way to go, even if it must travel back to and through tradition to get there. It is the messianic promise of a radically better future that, as much as anything else, keeps us at our task.

The Holocaust has dual meaning for me. On the one hand, it is our era's embodiment of the problem of theodicy, the justification of God's goodness in view of the existence of evil. On the other hand, the Holocaust is also the great moral termite in modernity's woodpile. The modern state, 20th-century technology, contemporary culture, indeed all of modernity's great accomplishments were used by the Nazis in the service of perhaps the worst evil in history. Modernity, particularly secular modernity, needs to respond to its own theodicy problem.

For us as Jews, our task in light of this tragedy, as it is in response to all tragedies, is to live meaningfully in its aftermath. A heightened sense of the preciousness of every Jew, of the sanctity of life, and of the need to combat evil wherever it may appear are the beginnings of the path to that end.

The establishment of the state of Israel is, to me, further evidence of the workings of an unseen hand in history. Celebration of that event is critical. First, whatever semblance of unity remains within the Jewish community can only be found in the Holocaust-Israel nexus. Further, insofar as Israel is concerned, God's affirmative answer to two millennia of Jewish prayers must be recognized. I have no idea how those who do not allow the events of 1948 and beyond to affect the essence of their Jewish experiences will respond when God asks at their final judgment how they could have been so ungrateful.

The great cultural schism today is between advocates of autonomy and advocates of authority. For those who live lives of radical autonomy, the moral universe is entirely self-contained and nothing exists beyond the infinite "me." I am Thinker, Utterer, Hearer, Thought, Word . . . I am the One and yet the All in All.

Locating the source of moral authority internally is fundamentally and unalterably at odds with religion's message and purpose. One who locates authority inside himself has no need for God's authority.

The problem is that autonomy is seductive. It is far easier to respond to myself than to an objective set of

standards, and the self-aggrandizement and pseudo-ego boost of following "my choice" attract the modern mind. But autonomy is, at the same time, intellectually and behaviorally nonrigorous, severely limited in its capacity to measure failure as opposed to success. It makes emotions and feelings the arbiters of behavior, and denies any purpose to transcendence other than the purely emotional. It is, therefore, ultimately unsatisfying. "Me," if truly left alone, is nothing but a wretched, infinitesimally small dot in the time-space continuum of the universe, like the dot in Edward A. Abbott's 19th-century classic, *Flatland*. Is it any wonder that insecurity, meaninglessness, and a painful lack of self-worth and self-confidence are the almost-universal psychic afflictions of the day?

Society and the language of contemporary poetics and culture provide the necessary where-withal for today's autonomous dots to ignore voices calling from the outside, and to pride themselves on doing so. Overcoming this is the great challenge. However, since at the core of autonomy lies meaninglessness, voices from the outside can indeed occasionally connect with the turmoil within.

Jewish religious unity is critically, if not mortally, wounded. Those like me who have tried to find common ground and serve as a bridge across the great divide have to admit that the greater movement in the past few years has been in the opposite direction, toward separating the two banks of the chasm. My plea to those on the Left and Right who have decided that their narrow agendas are more important than any semblance of national unity is that they stop and consider the consequences of their actions before continuing down this self-destructive path.

Since I believe that the autonomous vision of modernity and postmodernity is a failure, I believe it will ultimately falter. The conservative revolution in America and around the world is, in my view, driven primarily not by economics but by a sense that the moral quality of life is collapsing. Not only does such a collapse produce obvious societal problems, it also leaves life void of meaning and purpose.

A Jewish revival is possible, primarily because Jewish tradition speaks so well to the life of meaning. The great need will be to find thinkers and teachers who can offer the water of Jewish tradition to those thirsting in the deserts of modernity.

I do not forecast an Orthodox revival, necessarily, but I do see a developing commitment to serious Jewish involvement by many people. The challenge for Jewish leadership is to make the opportunity to do so available and the means to do so accessible.

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David Gelernter

Any Jew is entitled to struggle with the simple question, "Do you believe in God?" Of the two passages that define for me the theological essence of Judaism, one is the famous discussion in the Talmud (Menahot 29b) between God and Moses; Moses in heaven is granted a vision of the greatest of talmudic rabbis, Akiva ben Yosef, and then asks about the reward for such saintliness and scholarship as Akiva's. "Turn around," God says, and there is Akiva, done to death by the Romans. "Zu Torah," Moses demands, "v'zu s'khorah?"—This is Torah, and this its reward? "Be quiet," God tells him. "That has occurred to me."

I understand these words to assert that, at times, God Himself does not believe in God. No message is clearer in the Torah than a Jew's obligation to struggle with God ("Israel" means struggler-with-God, according to Genesis 32:29). Abraham the Founder lays out the classical Jewish approach when he asks God, with the greatest respect and transparent outrage, suppose there are a few good people in Sodom? "Will you actually sweep away the righteous with the wicked?" (Genesis 18:23). God and the deus have been struggling ever since.

The standard rabbinic formulation holds, with Exodus 24:7, that "risha (we shall heed) follows na'aseh (we shall do)"—believing is a consequence of acting. The nature of Judaism is to create a shared body of spiritual experience, not belief. This "shared body" is hard to explain because it has no analog. Maybe it is a sort of song that transcends its singers and goes on forever, or an ocean where the far shore is distant in time as well as space. In any case, it is natural for a Jew to struggle with the transcendence offered by communal religious experience just as he struggles with belief. Natural for him to fight against dissolving his personality (even temporarily) into a bigger whole; also natural to give in sometimes and come out the better for it.

Today the shared body of experience is almost defunct, and struggle is outmoded. Like most American Jews, I find myself able to observe only a tiny fraction of the Torah's commandments. Unlike some, I believe

that the commandments are binding. When I fail to perform a religious obligation, I do not want a soothing Reform or Conservative authority to tell me I am in luck--that particular obligation has been dropped from the new edition and I am free to ignore it. I am not free to ignore it and commit a sin when I fail to do it. I acknowledge my failings and recall that God is merciful. But I want to look real Judaism in the eye and come to grips with it every day--to imitate in a small way Jacob struggling with the angel even if, unlike Jacob, I always lose.

This is an uneasy, unhealthy response to Judaism, but at least it is a response. The failure of modern Judaism is the failure of modern America: the infantilization of our institutions and culture. If you lack the knowledge or concentration to read *Paradise Lost*, you might insist that the thing be cut down to size and translated into prose. Now you can read it but no longer want to--and Reform and Conservative Judaism (although we ought to acknowledge with respect and gratitude that they were serious attacks on a hard problem) have failed; we ought to admit it and move on.

I was at a wedding a few weeks ago that captured modern Judaism in microcosm. It used to be that a Jewish bride and a Gentile groom would avoid the embarrassment of a religious ceremony that mocked both communities--but ethnic identification is big nowadays, and a Reform rabbi was duly reeled in. Naturally the bride and groom concocted their own ceremony. Why ought a bride to hear in Hebrew the dry legal formula, "You are sanctified to me with this ring according to the laws of Moses and Israel," instead of "I promise to help you grow as a person" (their very words!), et cetera?

Because Jewish brides listened to the dry talmudic formula in 1954, in 1943, in 1935, in 1648, in 1066. Had this bride deigned to listen too, she would have honored them and asked their blessings. If the rabbi had chanted the traditional seven Hebrew blessings instead of speaking a shortened, modernized version in *Time*-magazine English, his song would have resonated with a million others through the centuries like a small instrument in a big mellow hall, and what was lost in chattiness would have been gained in dignity. Jewish ritual practice does change, but is intended to change at a slow walk, the way you move a full glass. The whole point of a wedding ceremony is to offer the couple a chance to enter into something bigger than themselves. But in modern America, there is nothing bigger than yourself.

The infantile insistence that religious ritual conform to you rather than the other way around is the essence of modern American culture, and is strangling Judaism. The American Jewish community needs to be reconstituted around a new kind of orthodoxy, which most of us (granted) will merely look at instead of plunging into; but it is mere empirical fact that only orthodox prayer and study have the power to keep the community together. Every Reform and Conservative synagogue ought to provide an orthodox minyan too (put it in the basement somewhere); most Jews have never once been part of one. The Orthodox community ought to regard itself as strictly obligated, in turn, to invite unorthodox Jews to synagogue and urge them to come at least once, even if they drive and park right out front and spend all Sabbath morning obliviously jingling their change. Merely following the traditional ritual is no guarantee (of course) of genuine religious feeling; if the typical Orthodox congregation were to move in the direction of hasidic ceremonial, that might be a good thing, too.

None of this is awfully likely to happen. "Being Jewish in America" will come to mean, in time, approximately what "being Scottish in America" means: nothing. Certain family names will suggest Jewish or Scottish origins.

When I was a child, my grandfather used to take me on Saturday evenings to a yeshiva belonging to the Bobover Hasidim in the Borough Park neighborhood of Brooklyn. We sat or stood in a dim packed room where the elderly rebbe presided at the head of a long table; I remember his black Sabbath coat, embroidered in rust-orange satin. The ritual of *melaveh malkah*, accompanying the Sabbath queen, is a hasidic specialty: in their reluctance to let the Sabbath go, they sing and pray into the night long after it is technically over.

When we first started making these visits I was too young to understand much of anything, but it didn't matter. The songs mostly had no words and you could sing whether you understood or not. The song in this overflowing study room was the song of a super-organism of many people, Jews living and dead: one song without end that you hear occasionally like pounding surf in the dark; the pulse of Judaism, beating the long tables in time to the music.

The other of the two pronouncements on which Jewish theology seems to me to rest is a statement made by many kabbalists, for instance Nahmanides (1194-1270) in the introduction to his Torah commentary: "the whole Torah consists of nothing but names of God." By reinterpreting the words, running some together and dividing others, you can read the Torah as a sequence of divine names or epithets. The obvious objection is that, when you do, you annihilate the plain sense. To which a kabbalist has to respond: that is exactly the

point; transcendence is not available in human language. But if you let go of the meanings, you may possibly catch a glimpse of it.

My wedding couple threw out the song of Judaism because they didn't like the words-but the words didn't matter anyway, in the end, and they were left with Milton in prose; and so are we all.

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Marc Gellman

God is not some problem I constitute, but rather that mystery within which I myself am constituted. I believe that God is the author of all moral laws, and of those ritual laws that link me to the sacred rhythms of Jewish time and space. When a ritual conflicts with the ethical teachings of Judaism, that ritual must be altered or abandoned. I believe that God has implanted within us eternal life, and I am bewildered and saddened by the widespread ignorance of this ancient and authentic Jewish belief. The World to Come is not an addition to but an essential part of my belief in God. It is the way the moral equilibrium of existence is restored, the way God's ultimate goodness is affirmed, and the way I am able to sustain the hope that I will not be separated forever from those I have loved.

Religions are open or tribal. You can join an open faith (Christianity, Islam, or Buddhism) by affirming its beliefs. You can join a tribal faith (Hinduism, Native American religions) only by being born into the tribe. Judaism is the only religion in the world that is both tribal and open. One is Jewish by birth, and yet one can convert to Judaism by affirming its beliefs and committing oneself to the practices that flow from those beliefs. The chosenness of the Jewish people has enabled the tribal and open elements of our faith to exist over time in a number of dialectical tensions: we believe that we are a people apart, and yet we believe that we are a light to all the nations. We accept those without belief as full Jews, and yet we created monotheism. The open elements of our faith keep us (I pray) from becoming racist xenophobes, while the tribal elements of our faith keep us from becoming rootless cosmopolitans.

Aristotle believed that all evil was merely the absence of good. I believe Auschwitz refutes Aristotle. The Holocaust was not just some horribly mistaken pursuit of the good, but willed radical evil. Radical evil on a smaller but still terrifying level persists in our time, and yet we, the survivors of the kingdom of night, often seem indifferent to the night that has descended upon Bosnia and Cambodia, Somalia and Rwanda, and upon the 40,000 children in this wounded world who will starve to death today. "Never Again" does not mean never again to Jews, it means never again to anyone. In the face of welcome moves by the Catholic Church to confront and atone for its anti-Jewish elements, I also worry that we are teaching the Holocaust in a manner that reinforces the inevitability of Christian anti-Semitism and therefore prevents a new generation of Jews from ever trusting in the sincerity of Christian repentance.

Israel is not merely a political entity, not only a homeland for the storm-tossed of our people. For me, Israel is Zion. It is the place where heaven and earth kiss, the place where tribe and faith merge into a seamless millennial hymn, the place where our people have returned to political power and historical hope. After 48 years I am still thrilled by its rebirth, and constantly amazed and uplifted by Israel's ability to transform Jewish identity. I even consider the act of eating felafel on Tel Aviv's Dizengoff Street as a true miracle. Even as the Orthodox political parties continue to strangle progressive Judaism, my Zionism has not grown weaker, but hotter for the struggle to ensure Jewish diversity in the Jewish state.

The greatest stimulus to Jewish belief in our time comes from the spiritual poverty of the secular world. The growing consensus among thinkers on both the Right and the Left that the secular city is spiritually unsustainable could well lead to a revival of faith across religious lines. But if people do return, they must not be subjected to the sanctification of every bourgeois atavism under the guise of a religious truth. They must hear more of what we Jews believe and less of what we doubt, more Jewish texts and less book and movie reviews, more hope and less despair. They must hear rabbis and thinkers who have the guts to say "no" to the culture. They must hear "yes" to a personal faith but "no" to a narcissistic spirituality.

They must hear a "yes" to the value of the family and "no" to all the forces that weaken families. They must hear how intermarriage is bad for us even if it is good for them. They must hear that our faith is true, but that there are many ways up the mountain of the Lord. They must hear that happiness is not the fruit of acquisitiveness, but the fruit of duty. In short, they must hear more and more about Judaism and less and less about the culture which, despite its freedoms and its glitz, has betrayed their souls, their families, their faith, and their tribe.

The obstacle to any possible renewal of Jewish belief is, paradoxically, the very same secular culture that

has made such a renewal necessary. As spiritually and morally barren as the culture seems to me, its appeal cannot be gainsaid. Advertising and its myriad delivery systems inoculate many to the appeal of faith. Teenage television programs and popular sitcoms never show kids going to pray, loving learning, or respecting adults. Music whose lyrics degrade women, clothing ads that sexually exploit children, and drugs that numb the mind and kill the soul may be abominations to our faith, but they are wildly popular among the members of our tribe. Winning at all costs has produced an epidemic of cheating and lying, but winners are munificently rewarded.

This is why, despite the testimony of soup kitchens and AIDS shelters run by religious organizations, despite the dramatically lower divorce rates among those who pray together regularly as a family, and despite the virtue of our ancestors and of religious exemplars like Martin Luther King, Jr., Abraham Joshua Heschel, Mahatma Gandhi, and Mother Teresa, many of our children, and many of us, have bought into the lie that religion is the source of our limitation rather than the source of our fulfillment. The last socially acceptable prejudice in America is the prejudice against those who take their faith seriously, and any possible Jewish renewal awaits the abolition of that prejudice, and the transformation of the culture that created and sustains it.

I believe that Jewish denominational divisions have largely outlived their usefulness. The only division that counts for me is the division between serious and non-serious Jews. I admire those who are open to any Jewish ritual that can deepen their Jewish life, to all Jewish values that can both inform and offer a critique of their moral choices, and to all the songs, burdens, and joys of our extraordinary faith and tribe.

My daily life is not altered one iota by predictions for or against a large-scale revival of Judaism in America. I still wake up every day trying to serve God, study Torah, do mitzvot, keep my evil inclination in check, and sustain my deepest hopes that the good in us will win, that the covenant will not be broken, that the naked will be clothed, that the hungry will be fed, and that the ones who sleep in the dust will one day be lifted up. For me only the trying matters, everything else is not my business.

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Neil Gillman

Whenever I am asked if I believe in God, I respond, "Tell me what you mean by God and I'll tell you if I believe in that God." On this issue, I insist that God transcends human understanding and language. That is what makes God God. To believe that human beings can comprehend God is idolatry, the cardinal Jewish sin.

The alternative to idolatry or worshipful silence is the claim that all characterizations of God are metaphors crafted by human beings. Metaphors combine to form myths. To the invariable question, "Do we then invent God?" I respond, "No, we discover God and create the metaphors/myths which reflect our varied human experiences of God." My faith is that these experiences are true, not in any objective sense of that term but subjectively, existentially. Our human experiences of God are objectively neither verifiable nor falsifiable. Finally, by myth, I mean not a fiction but rather a structure of meaning whereby human beings make sense of their life-experience. However "broken," that myth remains very much alive for me.

Much of the complex metaphorical system through which Jews have portrayed God remains vital for me. I affirm that God is unique, personal, transcendent; that God cares deeply about human life and history; that God has entered into a special relationship with the Jewish people; and that God creates, reveals, and will ultimately redeem. These metaphors flow from our ancestors' varied experiences of God in nature, history, and in their individual lives, and they have in turn continued to inform the experience of generations of Jews to this day.

Metaphors can reveal, but they can also blind. Therefore I also affirm our own right and responsibility to discard those metaphors which contradict our own experiences of God and replace them with others. Every myth enjoys a certain plasticity; the process whereby Jews reformulate the contents of their myth is what we call midrash.

The claim that Torah is "revealed" by God reflects our ancestors' understanding of how and why their distinctive way of viewing themselves and their world was accepted as authoritative. The biblical account of revelation is classic myth--historiography, not history--or, as Abraham Joshua Heschel put it, itself a midrash. Torah then represents the canonical statement of our myth and our guide for conducting our individual and collective lives in the light of that vision. That our ancestors understood themselves to be "chosen," i.e., singled out by God, is the way they accounted for their distinctive experience of redemption.

The ultimate authority for what entered into Torah ab initio, and therefore the ultimate authority for what in

Torah remains binding for any future generation, is a Jewish community--not all Jews at any one time, but those Jews in any generation for whom the myth remains alive. Inevitably, there will be many different, equally valid Jewish readings of that myth, and hence many different, equally authentic Jewish communities. The decision as to what readings are authentically Jewish is arrived at consensually within a committed community of Jews who have a stake in the process and in its outcome.

The notion that to be a Jew is to be bound to a covenant that entails specific obligations is the cornerstone of the classic Jewish myth. In our day, the individual Jew is free to choose his or her community, and one of the criteria for so doing is a determination of which commandments are binding for that individual. The Jew makes that decision out of the personal experience of being commanded, but also within the context of Jewish communities of the past and a Jewish community today. Ultimately, though I believe in self-obligation, I cannot function as a religious Jew without a minyan, i.e., without a community.

Eschatology is an integral part of the Jewish myth. It is the closing parenthesis (as the biblical myth of creation is the opening parenthesis) to the Jewish understanding of history. Just as there is no picture without a frame, so there is no sense to history without creation and eschatology. I affirm the universal, national, and personal dimensions of Jewish eschatology as integral to the Jewish myth. In particular, I affirm the doctrine of bodily resurrection, not as a biological statement but again as myth. It teaches me that God is more powerful than death, that my body is integral to my identity, and that history and society, both of which demand my bodily existence, are of ultimate importance to God.

Theologically, the Holocaust is one more striking instance of the fact that our experience of God in history is frequently eclipsed, that faith is not a constant but a momentary achievement, always challenged, and that moments in which God and faith are absent are also integral to the life of the religious Jew. Further, once we believe that God created us free, God must accept the inevitable fruits of that freedom, among which is our infinite capacity for evil.

Because I also believe that, however mysteriously, God works in human history, I believe that the creation of the state of Israel has religious significance; and, after a good deal of struggle, I have also come to believe that, despite all its ambiguities, it may also have redemptive significance. Whatever else it may represent, Israel is very much a human institution, and the process of redemption is neither progressive nor inevitable. But the very fact that we can now be masters of our own destiny, and that we have a setting for the potential engagement of Torah with the full range of issues posed by modernity, should be seen as a spark of the ultimate redemption to come.

I am not overly concerned with the issue of Jewish unity. My theology provides for pluralistic readings of God's will and I cherish that openness. Our major threat comes not from pluralism but rather from the insistence of some communities that only their reading of God's will is true and that other readings are heretical. Our most pressing problem is religious fundamentalism and literalism.

Despite the statistics, I am optimistic regarding the future of Judaism in America. I am overwhelmed by the religious creativity that has emerged in recent decades. We are far ahead of where we were when I first became a serious Jew in the 50's. Just look at the wealth of books on Judaism, the growth of Jewish scholarly activity, the flowering of liturgical and ritual creativity in liberal Jewish circles, the achievements of Jewish feminists, and the pockets of serious adult Jewish learning throughout the country--to mention only some of the evidence.

The noted Jewish historian Salo Baron, in the coda to his essay "The Modern Age," in *Great Ages and Ideas of the Jewish People* (1956), promises that if the American Jewish community could harbor a total of 500 first-rate scholars, writers, artists, rabbis, communal executives, and lay leaders, it would reach new heights of achievement. We surely harbor that number. We have always been redeemed by a saving remnant and that remnant is stronger today than it has been in generations.

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David M. Gordis

In stating that I believe in God I affirm my belief in a dimension of human experience that transcends the everyday and that cannot be adequately accessed using common language. I am aware of that dimension of experience but can claim no knowledge of it. I am comfortable using "God language" to refer to it. I am, therefore, appropriately considered a religious agnostic. I do not believe that a personal, conscious deity manipulates and controls human affairs. I find myself constantly "in tension" with the nature and reality of what I refer to as God, yet it is satisfying and meaningful for me to speak of God as the ground of all being, as the embodiment of the potential for growth and moral excellence.

As a Jew, I accept the authority of Torah as the embodiment of my people's encounter with God as I understand God. The authority of Torah is absolute, but its content evolves through the ongoing experience of the Jewish people and through the continuing process of interpretation and confrontation. Torah both generates values which are authoritative and reflects values which continue to be shaped and reshaped, drawing on human experience and judgment. That process distinguishes between that which is timeless in Torah and that which is dated and no longer authoritative. While not an elegant process, it is at the heart of the living Jewish experience.

By and large, I reject the notion of chosenness. When I use the traditional liturgical formulation of the idea, I interpret it in the conventional way as uniqueness, and I reflect on the distinctive experience of the Jewish people and on our insights and contributions to civilization. We are a gifted people with a special history and a remarkable longevity. But every community and culture is unique and the concept of chosenness is more mischievous than useful.

Jews today are challenged to play a special role as an "abnormal" people, living on the margins of many societies and yet experiencing national rebirth. Our calling is to sustain our particular culture and civilization as we serve to remind the world of the dangers of power, of limitations on sovereignty, and of the universality of the human experience. The most pernicious forces at work in the world today are extreme nationalism and religious extremism. Through our historical experience, our religious and ideological diversity, and the range of political and social settings in which Jews live, we can serve as living reminders of the dangers of these two great forces and of the incendiary threat at their intersection.

I understand messiah as a metaphor for a potential, dramatic transformation of the world into a place of justice, harmony, and peace. Whatever our understanding of God may be, the messianic age will come closer only through human efforts, and the messianic ideal is destined to remain never entirely fulfilled.

Along with the emergence of American Jewish life, the Holocaust and the establishment of the state of Israel are the most prominent features on the landscape of contemporary Jewry. They have had a significant impact on my openness to the dimension of experience which I associate with God. They have not had an impact, however, on my religious or theological positions. God is not responsible for evil, even the depths of depravity represented by the Holocaust. God is not responsible for historical achievements, even those as notable as the reestablishment of the state of Israel. Both of these events have intensified my sense of Jewish identity and had a role in shaping it. Neither has created a theological crisis or generated a "eureka" experience.

The fragmentation of American life, what Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. has called the "disuniting" of America, and the deterioration of loci for the creative and positive interaction of groups which form the tapestry of American society, constitute both a challenge and an opportunity for American Judaism. The strengthening of the group focus of American subcultures has encouraged Jews in greater numbers to reattach themselves to Jewish institutions and to reengage with Jewish religion, culture, and civilization. On the other hand, since this fragmentation threatens the American experiment, Jews need to understand better our stake in the success of that experiment. An American failure would be a crushing blow to Jewish life.

More generally, the principal challenge to Jewish life in America is to navigate the poles of particularism and universalism. The attractions of general education and culture have created a generation of Jews for whom their own culture is literally and figuratively a closed book, and Jewish life cannot be sustained without a literate community. The open society and the acceptance of Jews by predominantly Christian America challenge Jews to strengthen the Jewish family and find ways of lowering the incidence of intermarriage.

Americans by and large take religion seriously, but American Jews have traditionally done so less than others. The growth of fundamentalist and traditionalist religious groups in America poses some political risks for Jews; there is, after all, a big difference between a predominantly Christian country which preserves the separation between church and state and a Christian America which abandons it. Whatever religious or theological positions Jews arrive at, however, a larger society which takes religion and religious values seriously is a good model. One must take religion quite seriously, after all, to be a nonbeliever!

I am concerned about civility and not about unity. The core issue for Jews (and for others as well) is how we deal with the otherness of others, both Jews of other religious, political, or ideological views and non-Jews. We are not one; significant lines of difference exist, most clearly between literalist Orthodoxy and others in the religious community. We need to understand that such differences can be a source of enhancement, that diversity is a virtue, more than we need to create an impression of unity and uniformity, which do not exist.

It may be that Jewish denominationalism has gone as far as it can go. Major religious thinkers in American

Jewry cross denominational lines. Cultural, educational, and religious programs around the country increasingly bring together diverse denominational groups. New forms of synagogues and havurot (prayer groups) do not fall comfortably within denominations, and religious life on college campuses often softens or obliterates lines of denominational separation. My sense is that these energies are increasing and that this is a positive development. They will continue to grow, with the exception of traditionalist Orthodoxy.

Jews have never been a "large-scale" people, but, with that reservation, I firmly believe that we are on the threshold of substantial Jewish renewal in America and that, in fact, this renewal has already begun. The most remarkable reality of contemporary Jewish life is that the question we confront is not what will others do to Jews, but rather, what will Jews do about being Jewish. This is a truly radical departure from even recent Jewish reality. And Jews are beginning to respond. I know of no time in recent Jewish history when we have had access to so many intelligent, inquiring, and searching Jews. Many, to be sure, remain indifferent, but even for them the phenomenon of escape from Jewish identity has ended.

Developments in Israel and concerns about intermarriage have moved the issue of the creative vitality of Jewish life—"Jewish continuity," to use the slogan—to the center of attention of the Jewish community. In this case, the slogan can have an energizing value. Day schools, youth groups, summer camps, trips to Israel, a wide range of experiments in modes of learning and worship, the astounding proliferation of Jewish studies on American campuses, are all significant and promising developments. If there is increased investment in programs which are responsive to these probings and searchings, then we will see a transformation of the quality of Jewish life.

This is, of course, speculation. I tend to be optimistic, but neither optimism nor pessimism is the issue. The community as a whole needs to respond with openness, creativity, and high-quality opportunities for Jewish engagement, exploration, and enlightenment. Ultimately, assessment of this rejuvenation will need to await the next Commentary symposium on Jewish belief.

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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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Blu Greenberg

Yes, I believe in God. I must add all the caveats: with many questions, with moments of great doubt, with moments even of anger. But yes, I believe in God. For the gift of the Sabbath alone, I believe in God; and for nature; and for daily miracles; and for beautiful music, though I well know that it was God's covenantal partner who paired the notes and created the rhythm. Not every stirring of the heart connects me to God, but some do: the case-study method of theology.

Revelation? Yes. God revealed the Torah to the Jewish people at Sinai and then struck a covenant with them again in the plains of Moab. Some part of my DNA was also there at Sinai, in the crowd. Reading the weekly portion of the Torah, week after week, year after year, I never cease to be amazed at this treasure. And yet I have learned much from critical scholarship, which does not shatter my religious belief or compromise my love of traditional commentary; rather, it has opened up tremendous new insights, enabling me to see more graphically that which the tradition itself suggests--that the word of God is multivalent and multivocal, and still the word of God.

I accept the binding nature of the commandments, as interpreted by my community, the modern Orthodox. Not only do I feel bound by halakhah, but mostly I consider the laws as gifts, without which the quality of my life would be much poorer. I know there is the trap of routine--lack of spontaneity, loss of fervor and meaning--and often I fall into it; but the gains of embracing the whole system far outstrip the losses that could come from having to pick and choose anew each day.

God chose the Jewish people, beginning with the very first encounter with Abraham and Sarah. We are chosen in the sense that God loves us. Otherwise, there is no reason to explain why such a small and dispersed people is still alive today. But we were also chosen to serve as a witness to the world: how to live as an ethical community, a responsible and kind family, a caring neighbor, a believing spirit. This is why we were chosen to receive the Torah in the first place--to live it and to spread its message and its model as widely as possible without giving up our own unique identity. The same role and rules that applied to us at Sinai apply in New York and Melbourne.

The Holocaust has colored my way of looking at events in life, large and small. It is a prism, a consciousness that springs autonomously into action in the most ordinary circumstances--taking a shower, tucking the children into bed at night. I must admit also that reflections on the Holocaust at times take the steam out of my ritual performance and puncture my faith. But then I ask myself who am I, second-generation native American, to raise such questions when two rows ahead of me in synagogue sit survivors, still praying with all those memories in their heads?

On the other hand, Israel has done more to reconfirm my faith and identity and gratitude than I could have ever imagined. In no other issue am I more engaged. Though I am an Orthodox Jewish feminist living in America, when I awake each morning the first thing I look for in the paper is news about Israel. But it is more than the immediate urgencies. Simply to think about the miracles of Israel--I must say it--thrills me. Oh, I have my anxieties about the other stories of '48, about integrating the claims of Palestinians to the land, about world opinion, and most of all, about peace that seems so elusive. But I also celebrate the cosmic significance of Israel at the very core of my being.

Living in America, an open society, with every choice to be made; the opportunity to live openly as a Jew without repression or anti-Semitism, to feel freedom and acceptance so profoundly that you take it for granted--this has made it easier to be a Jew.

But it has also made it harder, for the forces that impelled Jewish identity in the past no longer operate. The underbelly of an open society is an attitude of "Why bother?" Without the tools--knowledge, ties to community, some formal religious expression--it becomes very difficult to hold on. Still, as long as someone retains the name Jew, there is a chance that the spark will ignite, if not in this generation then in the next or the next. Given the ubiquity of freedom, I find baffling the inhospitable response by some in my community to (a) converts who voluntarily take on the title of Jew, and (b) Jews who live their lives in less than the full embrace of halakhah. Every last Jew should be treasured, even more so in an open society.

Which brings me to intermarriage, our biggest challenge. I have changed my mind about this subject, and then changed it again. I grew up in a community that observed mourning rituals for children who "married out." But, from the perspective of sheer numbers alone, that response no longer works. I personally count

several intermarried couples among my friends, though twenty years ago I would not have imagined such a possibility.

Still, even with this knowledge and these friendships, I can say that intermarriage--that is, without conversion of the non-Jewish partner to Judaism--is the direst threat to our continuity and survival. The statistical chance that children of an intermarriage will identify themselves as Jews in adulthood is very poor--less than 20 percent. Essentially, this means that a Jew marrying out has chosen to cut the line, all intentions to the contrary notwithstanding. Given what it has taken to maintain the chain these many generations, given our small size, given what a great gift we carry--this is a tragic squandering of a priceless heritage.

Jewish unity? As my husband, Irving Greenberg, has written, we are heading for a split into two peoples unless we reverse the trends of delegitimation, exclusion, and mean-spiritedness among ourselves. There is no reason in the world--other than the wrong perception as to how much we really need each other--why workable compromises cannot be sought and found. That is not to say that we will all live alike in our Jewishness; or that we will cease to have serious ideological differences and even tough arguments. But we ought to find underlying common denominators that will enable us to live together, and the ground rules for argument must be civility, respect, and genuine listening.

Five factors have already contributed to a significant revival of Judaism in our time: the magnetism of the state of Israel; the expansion of Jewish day schools, including non-Orthodox ones; the new work in "outreach" to the non-affiliated; the Jewish education of lay leadership; and feminism.

Feminism has had an extraordinary impact on Jewish life--in women's lay and religious leadership, in the rooting-out of hierarchy and injustice in a highly ethical religion, and in the exhilarating freshness of women's rituals and spirituality. Men have shared in and been carried along on this crest of celebration. But perhaps the most significant development of all has been in the area of learning.

A virtual explosion of women's learning is taking place today. I speak not only of Talmud study or the creation of women's institutions of higher learning (like Drisha) in the Orthodox community. The phenomenon is occurring across the board, in Sisterhoods and Jewish Community Centers, in Federations, and at a vast variety of summer-learning institutes. This is the first time in Jewish history that so much emphasis on learning has come out of the women's community.

Of course, the explosion in Jewish learning is a general one in our day. But without the new sense of empowerment and entitlement that feminism contributed, women would have remained on the sidelines. Having now been pulled into the center of the learning revolution, they inspire the whole community by their example. Learning generates more learning, and insofar as Jewish knowledge offers a key to Jewish continuity, the reality of a much larger universe of learning Jews may yet powerfully affect the prospects of a truly large-scale Jewish revival in America.

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Joshua O. Haberman

I am somewhat equivocal about positive statements about God, but I am unequivocal in my rejection of the denial of God's existence. A godless cosmos emerging in endless cycles of randomness is the ultimate absurdity. Every fiber of my being negates this species of metaphysical nihilism.

I believe that the One, unique, and incomparable God is the core and source of all being. My God is personal, conscious, and self-revealing. The biblical doctrine of man "made in God's image" implies divine attributes such as intelligence, free will, and moral judgment as models for similar human characteristics, however inferior these may be.

The relationship with God is what the Bible is all about. It is the sum and substance of Judaism. "Relationship" is a vague and slippery term, but it affirms at the very least a connection, bilateral communication, reciprocal caring, and interaction.

I believe that God revealed to us collectively, and to some individually, truths about the universe, and guidance in the form of commandments for the conduct of life.

The sudden emergence of Israel's ethical monotheism, stunningly unprecedented, and unduplicated over one-and-one-half millennia, defies explanation by any theory of history. It is a true mystery, magnified by the moral and spiritual transformation of Israel and its unique survival from antiquity to this day. The eventual spread of the core of Judaism's monotheism through its daughter religions of Christianity and Islam among billions of people turns the mystery of Israel into a miracle. For all these reasons, the supposition of a divine

revelation which transformed Israel and, through Israel, is transforming mankind in a painfully slow "education" marked by countless rifts and relapses is not only an article of faith but a rationally persuasive proposition.

The Torah is our foremost document of revelation. We shall never know for sure which of its commandments were directly and explicitly revealed as stated and which are derivative, that is, extensions from revealed principles by way of interpretation.

With the falling away of the conditions which gave rise to them, many commandments tied to specific social, economic, cultural, and religious institutions can no longer be binding. However, the decision on what is and what is no longer binding is a most difficult and hazardous task for our religious leadership. The resulting controversies account for the splitting of Judaism into its various movements today.

My own criterion for accepting any part of the Torah as divinely revealed and binding consists of a threefold test. First, the pragmatic test of experience: the evidence of a commandment's benefit to the individual and society is a sign of its validity. Second, the consensus of Torah scholars, past and present. However, since there are many commandments on which no such consensus exists today, I must apply a third test, as proposed by the theologian Franz Rosenzweig: my personal response to the study and actual observance of the commandment. If its performance leaves me with a sense of having been truly commanded by God to act as prescribed, the commandment is binding, for me. Presently, I observe only certain commandments as binding, but hold myself open to the observance of others when further study and experience lead me to do so.

Deeply and ineradicably embedded in Jewish consciousness and history is the idea of God's covenant with Israel. In a universe in which no two blades of grass are alike, I am not scandalized by the notion that Israel has a distinctive aptitude and role in history. Historical naturalists deny a metaphysically assigned role for Israel and therefore reject the chosen-people doctrine. In their view, the "mission of Israel" represents ideals generated by the nation itself in the course of history. Little do they realize that a people choosing, on its own, a world-saving role--the perfection of mankind--would be the most unnatural phenomenon in the annals of history. The norm for nations is to pursue their own national interest, not the freedom, justice, and peace of all mankind. Because such an ambition totally contradicts the normal behavior of nations, it must have originated in a most uncommon--I should say unnatural--way: an act of God!

I believe in the core idea of the messianic hope: God has programmed human nature so that the good and the just will prevail in the end. Moreover, God has helped us reach this goal through the revelation of Torah, with its blueprint for the guidance of life. Man is naturally neither good nor evil. Evil can be overcome and man can be instructed and trained to live righteously. When all mankind is guided by Torah principles, we shall experience "salvation," that is, achieve the highest possible form of well-being in security and peace.

The Holocaust raises questions about Germans, Jews, and God which we may never be able to answer. We have yet to understand the suddenness with which Germany, Austria, and the millions of West, Central, and East Europeans who collaborated with the Nazis sank from a high level of civilization--or so we thought--into depths of depravity. How could such advanced technological skill be employed for the savage purpose of mass slaughter?

The Holocaust also lowered my opinion of the quality of our communal leadership and of the political acumen of our people. How could nearly five generations of Jews, from the beginning of the 19th century to the outbreak of World War II, so belittle or altogether disregard the countless warning signals of the approaching catastrophe?

And where was God in all this?

A number of ideas about God and man perished with the six million Jews. In the first place, human reason, which had been put in God's place by the Enlightenment, was toppled from its eminence. Henceforth, psychologists, anthropologists, political scientists, and historians must concede a bigger role to the irrational and violent proclivities of human nature in shaping the course of history. Theologically, we must part with an unwarranted, childish dependence on God's providence, such as we find in Psalm 121: "The Lord is thy keeper, the Lord is thy shadow upon thy right hand.... The Lord shall keep thee from all evil." Such statements are devout hopes but not theological doctrines.

How does God help us? Does He ever? God should not be expected to do for us what we are able to do for ourselves. We have been put into a habitat which is ours to control: "The heavens are the heavens of the Lord but the earth has He given to the children of men" (Psalms 115.16). We do not in the least diminish the enormous burden of guilt of Nazi anti-Semites if we admit that a tragically misguided Jewish ostrich policy played into their hands.

My ultimate question with reference to the Holocaust is: could not God have created a perfect world and a human species incapable of doing evil? But we might as well ask the still greater question: why did God bother to create life at all? Why is there anything instead of nothing? Such questions are for God, not us, to answer.

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David Weiss Halivni

There are three principles which I believe are the foundation upon which the Bible rests, and which constitute our basic, fundamental beliefs. First, humankind is not self-sufficient. If humankind were completely to fulfill itself, through all possible avenues—emotional, intellectual, aesthetic—and if humankind were to find a complete outlet for all these things, it would still crave something more, something beyond, something transcendent. The very nature of human beings, their finite nature, is such that there will always be room for something beyond, and always an urge toward something beyond. That beyond is God.

So there is that being which transcends us. There will always be an abyss beyond which will be God and across which humankind will always try to reach out but never fully succeed. That unresolved, constant desire is what defines humankind, and sets up the relationship between humankind and God.

The second principle which the Bible assumes, and which is shared, minimally, by all religious traditions that subscribe to the Bible, is that the transcendent being we call God broke into human history and made contact with us. In tradition, of course, we call this revelation.

Third, these religious traditions believe that the legacy of that meeting is the Torah. One might, of course, contend that God addressed us but that nothing remained behind from this encounter. The idea of Torah, however, is that God not only spoke to us but left us an inheritance; He left us the Torah.

The belief that there is a God, and that this God broke into human history, and that the Torah is the result of that meeting, is something I believe in, and such belief is essential to anyone who regards the Bible as the source of divine information.

When it comes to the commandments, we are already moving beyond the Bible—into different religious traditions. But if the question is, do I accept the binding nature of the biblical commandments, the answer, for me, is yes, those specified as such in Jewish tradition. Commandments in Judaism fall into many different levels, and these different levels have specific, detailed, practical ramifications. I personally find all the mitzvot, including those which are called rabbinic, binding. These latter are, of course, governed by their own restrictions and regulations; but in accordance with these qualifications I accept them.

Let me say what chosenness is not; it should not carry any racial overtones. According to our sages, there is no people who cannot become Jewish. I reject even the notion that the Jews have the highest kind of spirit which other nations do not have. I accept the Halakhah that every person, in that respect, is created in the divine image, and that the door is always open for conversion without distinction or qualification.

Having said this, though, I still believe that nations are sometimes chosen, just as individuals are chosen. One can say, for example, that Shakespeare was chosen to give his work to the world. The Greeks, in a sense, had a certain function, and were chosen. The Jews were chosen in the sphere of religion and morality. These are the areas in which the Jews have contributed to the world at large, and therefore they are chosen, if by chosen we mean that people make a specific contribution which is not shared to the same extent, or equaled, by others.

As to messianism: that is complicated. Of course, the belief in a messiah is cardinal, but these things are not well defined. The life of the world to come is perhaps deliberately left ambiguous in Judaism. One has to believe that death is not the end; but what happens afterward remains unspecified. The sources do not say exactly what the messiah will be. Nevertheless, the idea that mankind will be redeemed is central in Judaism and I therefore accept it.

The Holocaust is the most difficult part for me. It is difficult in many respects, not least of which is that it is linked in Commentary's question with the state of Israel—for me this is a problem.

Religiously, the Holocaust means something contradictory. On the one hand, we can no longer accept the past. Something went deeply, badly wrong, and therefore we cannot continue as though nothing at all had taken place. We should not do exactly what we were doing before. On the other hand, after the war one needs the reassurance of God and of tradition even more. One must still walk humbly with the Lord our God.

If this is given up, then no basis is left, no shelter, no support. The Holocaust survivor, therefore, lives in two worlds. The survivor must challenge the past, or else it will seem as though he were approving it; but at the same time, how can we go on without God?

There are those who connect the Holocaust and the state of Israel--as though God somehow compensated us for the children who were gassed. I do not. Nevertheless, those who imbibed the experience of anti-Semitism with their mothers' milk, who were literally frightened by every Gentile, even at a distance, most appreciate what Israel means. Walking upright after so many centuries and generations strengthens the pride and security of Jews, especially survivors. The state of Israel does not exempt us from continuing the tradition of God and the Torah. On the contrary, the Bible specifies Israel as the place in which the Torah is to be fulfilled. Nevertheless, the state of Israel adds a religious dimension even to lives of those who are not observant.

Concerning the contemporary American situation I do not speak as an expert; I am not a sociologist. However, what I see is that the same feature of American culture is both the greatest advantage and the greatest danger. That is: the freedom we enjoy here. I do not know if anyone has enjoyed freedom as much as I have. I came to this country with no means and no secular education and, thank God, I have reached the highest level of the university. All this was made possible by American freedom and American opportunity.

At the same time, from my position in the academic world, where the rate of assimilation is so high, I can see the peril of this freedom. I have enough trust in the eternity of Israel that I do not fear the worst, and I do not think that hope comes only from the more right-wing sectors of Judaism. Yet even with this almost mystical trust, the situation with regard to assimilation sometimes scares me.

Within American Judaism, I am convinced that the Right is moving farther to the Right and the Left farther to the Left. Religious extremity itself does not offend me. It is the lack of tolerance, the lack of love for the other group which offends me. Tolerance and love for those who differ are essential. How do we achieve unity? We must live it. We must have more people who embody tolerance and love as personal examples. Even the most scrupulous observance does not preclude this.

Do I see any prospect of a large-scale revival? I would be glad if we were to hold our own. We have seen that predictions are suspect. Before World War II, it was said that there would be no Orthodoxy in America. Then there was a rebirth. Now sociologists tell us that we are past our zenith in this country. So I do not know, but I

conclude with the prayer that America will remain America with all its freedoms and that the Jewish people will take advantage of this freedom to preserve their relationship with Torah.

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Susannah Heschel

I was raised in a profoundly spiritual home and I will always be deeply grateful to my parents for giving me the sensitivities to perceive the divine presence and for teaching me how to pray. Visiting the hasidic relatives of my father, Abraham Joshua Heschel--many of them had managed to escape from Europe and move to New York--became for me childhood experiences of holiness. I will never forget how moved I felt in the presence of my uncle, the Kapitshinitzer rebbe. His gentleness and sensitivity impressed me deeply and gave me the sense that the holy is linked to the vulnerable. There was a religious dimension to life that I was privileged to experience as a small child, and it made a lasting Impression.

At the same time I was frustrated and annoyed from my earliest childhood days by the senseless rules that relegated me, with the other females, to the kitchen, preparing the food, while the rebbe sat at his table, teaching and singing with his Hasidim. I could not accept that and I complained about it, from the time I was five years old. I did not want to overthrow anything, I just wanted to be part of the experience. Essentially, I saw two kinds of Hasidism: a vibrant spiritual and intellectual life for men, and a life on the margins for women. I did not want a life in the kitchen or behind the partition in the synagogue excluded from the study, singing, dancing, prayer, and contemplation that make Hasidism so vibrant.

Did God reveal all the commandments, even those unfair to women? I do believe there have been events of divine revelation, and that my soul was present at Sinai, but I also realize the crucial distinction between the word of God and the word of men. I have always firmly believed that God would never forbid me to be counted in a minyan, a prayer quorum, or to lead the prayers, but rather that such prohibitions express the will of some human beings. What we have may be the Judaism of men; we need the Judaism of God.

For many feminists, classical Jewish teachings about God are onerous. The overwhelmingly male imagery of God is intrinsically tied to notions of divine transcendence and omnipotence, they argue, and overcoming patriarchy means a radical alteration of Jewish theology. While such objections may be valid, I do not find divine transcendence and omnipotence the most salient features of most classical Jewish theology. On the contrary, rabbinic and medieval texts more often present God as engaging in empathic resonance to human suffering than as an omnipotent ruler of the universe. Expressions of God's inner emotional life abound, reinforcing precisely the sort of theological expressions encouraged by feminism.

It is a moral outrage that until the modern era only men have had the opportunity to express their religious views and experiences. Just because those views are male-authored, however, does not mean women cannot appropriate them. The great tragedy is that the vital centers of Jewish religious and intellectual life in Europe were wiped out, making the struggle to recover our spiritual heritage even more difficult.

Ironically, modernity and secularism, anathema to religious men, have opened new religious possibilities for Jewish women. For the first time in Jewish history large numbers of women are able to study classical texts, from yeshiva-style learning of Talmud to university-based historical analyses of Judaism. Women are writing interpretations of Jewish law, commentaries on the Bible, new midrashim, and perhaps one day women, too, will write sacred hasidic literature.

The wish for full inclusion in Jewish religious life has remained with me to this day. I seem to have been born a feminist, with a strong sense of justice, and I was also raised with a love of the spiritual dimension, with a longing for moments of holiness. I feel I am a Jew without a home. Within many segments of modern Orthodoxy, halakhah, religious law, seems to have taken on the attributes once assigned to God: omni-science, omnipotence, and immutability. The rigidity of halakhah—"remove one brick and the entire edifice will collapse"—is a peculiarly modern Orthodox attitude. The dilemma is that while Conservative, Reconstructionist, and Reform Judaism have made many wonderful, thoughtful decisions equalizing the status of women and men, I feel in them an absence of the intense prayer and devotion that fill the little hasidic shtiebl, or prayer house.

Chosenness strikes me as a very modern formulation; it is barely an issue in classical Jewish texts. When I was growing up, being Jewish was always associated with generosity and devotion to others, and a mitzvah meant doing something for another human being, or for God. My father used to say that a mitzvah is a prayer in the form of a deed. I also learned from him that religious life and social justice were intertwined. The great concerns of the prophets and the rabbis were not the minutiae of halakhah, or the refinement of personal piety, but the treatment of widows and orphans, cheating in the marketplace, and atrocities committed during war.

Even as messianism means the ultimate conquest of evil, it also means conquering evils one by one in the here and now. To speak out against human-rights violations is itself a religious act, and I understand why my father, upon returning in the mid-1960's from the civil-rights march in Selma, Alabama, said, "I felt my legs were praying."

While I understand the loss of faith some Jews feel as a consequence of the Holocaust, it seems to me misdirected, reminding me of parents who divorce after the death of a child. Neither parent is responsible for the child's death, yet the horror is so great that the relationship becomes untenable. When Germans murder members of our own family of Jews, it is not clear that the logical response is to divorce God. A better question might be how to retain confidence in the humanity of our fellow human beings.

The political and cultural gains achieved by the establishment of the state of Israel are extraordinary, and the intellectual vibrancy of the country makes being Jewish more fascinating than it has ever been. The complexities of relating Jewish identity to Israeli identity demand a more differentiated understanding of Judaism. Why is it that only in Israel I could not find a minyan in which to say kaddish for my father? The Orthodox synagogues would not tolerate me as a woman, while the Reform and Conservative congregations were too weak in members to hold daily services.

On a spiritual level, Israel offers extraordinary possibilities; I feel parts of my soul come alive only when I am in Jerusalem. While my commitment to the state is absolute, my politics are with those Israelis who strenuously object to the occupation and subjugation of Palestinian populations and land, and are appalled that torture of prisoners is committed in the name of the state.

American Jews today seem to be thirsting for authentic Judaism, but unsure where to turn. For me as a woman, the gains achieved during the past 30 years have been remarkable, but it will take some time to bring together the moral justice of feminism with the fragile remnants of Judaism's spiritual traditions.

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Milton Himmelfarb

Do I believe in God? "I accept the universe," Margaret Fuller said. Poor woman, the universe did not long accept her. I accept God. I hope He accepts me.

Is the Torah divine revelation? Without maintaining the photographic accuracy of Exodus 19-20 and Deuteronomy 4-5, I believe that a law was revealed--a numinous word--to our ancestors and transmitted to us.

Gershom Scholem, the great scholar of Jewish mysticism, believed in God but not in kashrut, unable to imagine Him closely involved with the kitchen. Scholem knew, of course, that the rabbis had warned against trying to calculate the relative weights of the mitzvot: what seems to be a minor one, sparing a mother bird when taking her young (Deuteronomy 22:6f.), entails the same reward of long life as the Decalogues' mitzvah of honoring father and mother (Exodus 20:12 and Deuteronomy 5:16). But that was homily, not law. The law the rabbis decreed is that mitzvot do differ in weight. For only three of the 613 must a Jew allow himself to be killed rather than be compelled to transgress (the prohibitions of bloodshed, unchastity, and idolatry).

Aristotle on the care needed in changing laws (Politics 1269a) is still useful: ". . . it is proper for some laws sometimes to be altered. But . . . it . . . needs ... much caution.... Are all the laws to be open to alteration . . .?"

Scholem must have overlooked this caution about slippery slopes. Not even so profound an expositor of Jewish antinomianism is likely to have envisioned rabbis adding the bedroom to the kitchen as one more area beyond God's purview.

When the Reform rabbis were considering whether to ordain homosexuals, a professor at their seminary, Hebrew Union College, reminded them that Leviticus 18--the Jewish tradition's choice, over 186 other chapters in the Pentateuch, as the reading for Yom Kippur afternoon--calls homosexual acts an abomination. A member of the majority easily disposed of the objection: "It's pretty late in the day for Scripture to be invoked in CCAR [Central Conference of American Rabbis] debates." First the Talmud went and then Scripture itself; and within Scripture first kosher and treyf flesh, fish, and fowl and then kosher and treyf sexual relationships.

Nor is the end in sight. New victims of discrimination will emerge and assert their right to equality. For instance: isn't prejudice against the pedophilic, necrophilic, and the incestuous religious in origin, and isn't discrimination rooted in religious prejudice unconstitutional? Over religious prejudice, rights will win every time.

"How odd/Of God/To choose/The Jews." According to *The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations* it was the obscure William Norman Ewer (1885-1976) who wrote this celebrated quatrain. Lou H. Silberman, in his instructive entry on "Chosen People" (*Encyclopaedia Judaica*, vol. 5, coil. 498-502), attributes it to Hilaire Belloc, author of the anti-Semitic *The Jews* (1922). To Jacques Maritain as to other Christian theologians, Protestant as well as Catholic, the Election of Israel is not an oddity but a Mystery.

Silberman ends his "Chosen People" with this: "Modern Jewish thought is still grappling with the problem . . . in a way that does justice both to the universalist values of Judaism . . . and to the specific character of Jewish historical and spiritual experience...." For modern Jews the very notion of Jewish chosenness can be troubling--elitist, ethnocentric. Maybe we would feel more comfortable if, instead of talking about Election and Mystery, we talked about less lofty extraordinariness.

A science-fiction fantasy: when the alien scouts return in their UFO to their home planet, they report the many odd things they have observed on Earth. One of the oddest is the disproportion between how conspicuous certain humans called Jews are and how few they are--fewer than 25 in 10,000. Odder yet is that the 99.75+ percent are called Gentiles because they are not the .25-percent who are Jews.

What is our distinctive mission today? As always, to remain in being as Jews. Our other missions are additional.

Messianism? We must continue to pray for the messiah's coming, and when he comes we must examine his credentials. In the past we suffered repeatedly from false messiahs. More recently we have been burned by false messianisms.

The Holocaust and Israel are in their opposite ways part of the Jewish disproportionateness and

extraordinariness--the larger-than-lifeness--through which I feel Jewish chosenness. At yizkor time, when memorial prayers are recited for the dead, I mourn those murdered in the Holocaust; in my thanksgiving for bread and on the Sabbath I pray for Israel.

Will American culture and society be good or bad for the Jews?

Jewish self-hate--Jewish anti-Semitism--is less virulent than it was, in part because Gentile anti-Semitism is less virulent. This means that the psychological and social cost of being a Jew and the temptation of abandoning the Jewish religion and community have shrunk. At the same time, so has the tempting attractiveness of the Gentile world.

In the 30's, many of the philosopher Sidney Hook's Jewish students told him that if they had had a choice, they would have been born Episcopalian. Also in the 30's Margaret Mitchell--the literary critic, not the novelist--said to Elliot Cohen, who was to be Commentary's first editor, "The trouble with you Jews is that you think you would be happy if only you were Aryan. You have this illusion of Aryan happiness." Such things would not be said now.

On the other hand, a kind of Gresham's law can operate in culture as in finance. It isn't easy for a demanding, disciplined culture to compete with the loose, indulgent culture that prevails in America (and the rest of the Western world, not excepting Tel Aviv).

Much that is done and said in the name of Jewish religion, here as in Israel, is in effect anti-Judaic. Still, indifference and outright hostility worry me more. In some circles where Jews are no strangers, "religion" is a dirty word.

As to the possibility of a large-scale revival, "Is any thing too hard for the Lord?" More probably, there will be--to echo Ninotchka's sinister justification of Stalin's purges in the eponymous film, "Therrre will be fewerrr but betterrr Rrrussians"--fewer but better Jews. On the demographic side, they will intermarry less than we do now and may procreate more.

"Hatikvah," the Zionist and Israeli anthem, proclaims, "Our hope is not lost." That is in answer to the contemporaries of Ezekiel (37:11), who, more than 2,500 years ago, had despaired, crying, "... our hope is lost...."

Hope is a Jewish virtue.

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Lawrence A. Hoffman

We suffer less from lack of belief than from inadequate language to express it. How can we believe what we do not even know how to say? Conversations about belief often make honest people feel guilty for doubting what they think everyone else knows for sure. We can confirm or deny belief in "God," "revelation," and so forth only by asking first what these might mean rephrased for modern ears.

Consider the Sh 'ma and its blessings, the daily liturgical staple that affirms our faith in one sole God Who (a) creates all things, (b) reveals Torah to Israel, and (c) promises redemption. What modern metaphors capture best this threefold insistence on creation, revelation, and redemption?

My metaphor combines time, space, and history. What astounds about the universe is the aesthetic and scientific miracle by which the finely tuned network of natural law accords so beautifully with mathematics. For modern Jews, the doctrine of creation is the affirmation that the universe has design. Revelation describes our faith that purpose has a place within this cosmic order: in touch with ultimate wisdom, we humans can matter in a grand scheme of which we know almost nothing but into which we have been thrust. Redemption is the realization that, over the long run, purpose within pattern gives us the right to hope. Pattern, purpose, and hope are the contemporary equivalents of creation, revelation, and redemption. They sustain us on the tiny bridge of time called history.

If the age of just the earth (never mind the universe, which is four times older) were a line in space equal to the distance from New York to Los Angeles, Jewish history since Abraham and Sarah would cover only a few feet, and human existence, prehistory and all, would encompass only part of a single span of the Golden Gate or the George Washington bridge. The Holocaust, therefore, in all its unspeakable horror, is insufficient to shatter optimism. It is, as it were, a blip on the screen of cosmic time. The state of Israel is a similar, albeit positive, tiny step in time, an outpost of hope we must defend, but hardly a sudden sign of imminent messianic victory, as some extremists imagine. Life is always lived in the narrowness of bridge spans. Faith is the insistence that the bridge goes somewhere, connecting past and future in a present that has meaning.

For the bridge is not without direction. Creation pulses toward ever-increasing freedom. If God is the power behind universal pattern, the guarantor of purpose, and the ground for hope, we can say, in short, that God wants human freedom; has designed a universe that invites it; and summons Jews to champion it. The Jewish people's moral purpose is to tell our story of servitude and freedom, to act it out in ritual that revives our vision and steels our nerve, and then to demonstrate in all we do our faith in freedom as the redemptive end of history.

Beyond the moral opposition of freedom and enslavement, Judaism codes the world also as *kodesh* or *hol*, the holy or the everyday. We move from slavery to freedom; but back and forth between *kodesh* and *hol*. Torah is a clarion call for freedom and a blueprint for meaningful human life in the holy and the everyday.

"Holy" (or "sacred") likewise requires modern translation. It means nonutilitarian-like Hanukkah candles which our liturgy says "are holy; we have no right to use them." Sacred relationships are those where people do not use each other. God is uniquely holy (beyond manipulation). We have holy times and places, too: like the Sabbath, when we do no utilitarian work, or the *kotel* (the Western Wall), where we stop to pray but from which we derive no secular gain.

We humans have access to only that single quadrant of the space/time continuum which we call our present. We cannot see it "all at once"--a metaphor combining space ("all") and time ("at once"). The Jewish map is thus an ellipse, revolving equally about two centers: Israel and the Diaspora. Diaspora Jewry sanctifies time; Jews in Israel sanctify space. We need them both. I am a religious Zionist in that I strive for redemption in our land (space), but also in history (time).

Given my faith in freedom, I am not dismayed by (as the editors put it) "movements of personal and sexual liberation." I even understand (though I do not welcome) "assimilating or otherwise falling away." Increased options are the price of freedom, which (as I say) "God wants," and so should we.

I decry the reactionary call to reign in freedom, and the provocative rhetoric that pits the "good Jewish guys" against the bad. Endemic moral chaos and increasingly marginal Jewish identity derive less from the suspension of limits by those in authority than from our society's widespread suspicion that life is meaningless. Here, I do indeed see the prospect of large-scale Jewish revival (Commentary's word, not mine; I do not think we are dead), since Judaism is uniquely outfitted to provide demonstrations of human meaning, for ours is a story that celebrates freedom, while affirming pattern, purpose, and hope.

Here is the challenge: to overcome old habits that ground Jewish survival in fear of anti-Semitism and memories of European ethnicity. A century ago we needed Jewish hospitals, colleges, clubs, and centers--for Jews were not welcome in the mainstream. Now we need local communities of the sacred, where people come to mark life's passages and discover the Jewish way of making sense of the world. We have been conditioned by a "foreign-affairs" agenda-saving Jewish lives abroad and founding a Jewish state, for which we successfully galvanized the combined power, wealth, and corporate wisdom of national organizations. The struggle to save ourselves is a different challenge, requiring small-scale communal care suffused with religious vision. What Federations were to the world we are leaving, synagogues must become for the world we are building. But they will have to transform themselves from old-time ethnic addresses to spiritual oases, sacred centers where the realities of pattern, purpose, and hope are beyond doubt.

Jews by choice are a particular source of promise for us. A post-ethnic Judaism requires no particular old-country memories. It overcomes loneliness and fragmentation with life led daily in committed and caring community. Here is a spiritual invitation worth opting for, especially in an age of uncertainty where people seek out meaning. But meaning is a lifelong search, and so, finally, revival requires that we outgrow our obsession with childhood education at the expense of attending to Judaism's adult message. Judaism should be recast as intellectually satisfying and emotionally enriching to the most discerning adults among us, for a religion worth affirming cannot be for children only.

I welcome denominationalism as an increase in Jewish options, but I fear triumphalism and closed-mindedness. There is no single standard of Jewish authenticity. As I respect other Jewish choices that I cannot personally espouse, I expect others to esteem as equally profound my own determination to be a Reform Jew. I too am engaged in the age-old task of Jewish survival and the ever-new hope that I may help those I meet on the bridge of time that is my life.

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Francine Klagsbrun

I live the life of a believing Jew, but always with the awareness that my belief is shadowed by doubt. On the most primitive level, I plead and bargain with the God I'm not sure exists when I or people dear to me face illness or trouble. I rage at that God when I confront suffering and injustice, but also thank God for the good that comes my way. When I watch the days lengthen in springtime or consider the myriad forms of life on earth it seems inconceivable to me that there is not a Supreme Being Who gives order and direction to our universe. When I contemplate the random cruelties and horrors the world holds it seems inconceivable that there is.

I live with the tension of both believing and not believing, recognizing that I will probably never resolve it. I grew up at a time when Jews rarely spoke about God, and theology, it was said, was not a Jewish pursuit. That has changed now, and God-talk is everywhere. Much of that talk seems to me New Age "spirituality" translated into Jewish life. But not all. I envy those people whose souls are truly in love with God, and I admire those engaged in serious explorations into the nature of divinity.

Still, I am more comfortable performing mitzvot, the deeds and commandments of the tradition, than analyzing their origins, and most comfortable studying our sacred texts. But how perform and why study without perfect faith? The traditional answer is that from the doing will come the believing. Mine is that-aside from the moral laws in the Torah-I try to keep those practices that have most defined the Jews as a people through the ages. These include the Sabbath and dietary rules, the festivals and life-event rituals. Jews have lived by these laws and customs for thousands of years, and too often died for them. How dare I ignore them?

As for the texts, they are the lifeblood of our tradition. What happened at Sinai is a mystery I cannot fathom, but something did happen to assure the people of Israel that divine purpose informed every aspect of their existence. The Torah may have had several authors over time, but at its core it remains inspired by a people's conviction of their encounter with God.

That conviction forms the base of the belief in Jewish chosenness. I accept that belief in the sense of the uniqueness and influence of Jews and Judaism. And here again is mystery. Jewish survival in the face of exile, persecutions, and genocide is an astonishment. The Jewish impact on civilization is mind-boggling: monotheism and the Hebrew Bible are only the most obvious Jewish contributions to world culture. The dark side of chosenness, of course, has been the unparalleled suffering Jews as a group have endured. But the ability to affirm and reaffirm their religion despite that suffering is another testament to Jewish singularity.

Traditionally the doctrine of chosenness has included the responsibility of Jews both to follow the teachings of the Torah and to bring those teachings to the world. That responsibility continues. By dint of their history, Jews bear witness to the basest impulses of humanity. Their role includes combating those impulses by calling attention to evil and suffering wherever they occur.

The message of Jewish messianism is a universal one: peace and harmony among all humankind under the dominion of one God. That the message has been corrupted by the periodic acceptance of false messiahs and messianic expectations does not diminish the ideal. It is an ideal of striving toward human perfection. By living according to the ethical precepts of their religion, I still believe that Jews can show the way.

Underlying all my religious views is a passionate belief in the Jewish people. That belief is so deeply part of my persona that neither the Holocaust nor the state of Israel has substantially influenced it. Their impact was different: the Holocaust fills me with fury at and distrust of the nations of the world, and with the certainty that Jews must control their own destiny. Israel offers that control, and for Israel I have unconditional love. Even when I disagree with its policies (which I frequently do), love remains. Theologically, I am of the school that regards humans, not God, as responsible for the Holocaust. Yet my doubting self cannot abide the idea of a God Who could allow such unmitigated evil in the universe. Humans are responsible for Israel also, yet my believing self regards that country as a miracle, ever ongoing.

America is a miracle of another sort. The unprecedented freedom and security Jews enjoy here and the ease with which they fit into American society have made them more confident than ever in openly expressing Jewish beliefs. One indication of Jewish confidence is the growth of day schools among all denominations: the numbers have tripled in the past 30 years.

Paradoxically, the openness of American society also poses the most serious threat to Jewish continuity. Whereas in the past intermarriage often signified rejection of one's Jewish heritage, today it is a reflection of possibilities. It is possible to grow up in a Jewishly-committed home and marry out simply because Jews interact comfortably with non-Jews at every social level. It is possible for a Jew to disappear into the larger society, not out of malice toward Judaism, but because that society is so receptive to Jews.

A different aspect of American society has unexpectedly and profoundly stimulated Jewish belief, and that is

the women's movement. In itself that movement was originally thoroughly secular, but the Jewish feminism that grew from it was built by religiously knowledgeable women, and has focused to a great extent on religious practice. Women serve as rabbis and cantors and participate as never before in Jewish ritual and prayer. They have taken up serious study of the Torah and are creating their own commentaries on it. Jewish feminists are challenging traditional male images of God and questioning the language of liturgy. Though many of these new religious roles have caused controversy, they have also invigorated Judaism in America.

Disagreements about the religious roles of women are one source of division in American Judaism. At their root, as at the root of many other divisions, is opposition between the Orthodox movement on the one hand and the Reform, Conservative, and Reconstructionist movements on the other. The last three have differing ideologies, yet, among them, none labels the other inauthentic. Large segments of the Orthodox leadership--although not all--do so regard the other groups. As a result, there is little common ground for religious unity, and centrist Orthodox rabbis who do seek commonality with other denominations are often themselves derided by the more extreme.

I find this situation horrendous. Unity has never been the hallmark of the Jewish people, but a kind of disunity that attempts to delegitimize genuine religious commitment bodes ill for the future. I doubt we will ever have Jewish religious unity, but we must find a way to live together more respectfully in our disunity.

For all the difficulties of American Judaism, however, I cannot join the doomsayers. I do not expect a large-scale return to Judaism in America, but a deepening one. Women's increasing involvement in study, prayer, and ritual is a powerful force for renewal. What they learn and feel about Judaism they will pass on to the next generation. In addition, the growing numbers of young people enrolled in day schools and college-level Jewish-study programs will comprise a nucleus of educated, caring Jews. Beyond that, who knows what other new, unexpected forms of Jewish expression will appear on the scene? We have not survived and influenced others because of our numbers but because of what we have had to say. So we will continue.

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David Klinghoffer

Though we envision idolatry, the practice called in the Talmud *avodah zarah*, as a matter of praying to stone or wood, it can be accomplished without them. As the experience of American Jewry shows, we can just as easily fashion new gods from ideas and emotions, and a logic inherent in Judaism helps us do it. A logic to idolatry? Yes, for the holy texts of our faith present us with certain non-negotiable choices.

Having selected the people Israel to serve the world as a model of commitment to Him, God issued His instructions to us in a document: the Torah. Now either we accept, contrary to what Bible "critics" claim, that in the Sinai wilderness God gave the Pentateuch to Moses in its familiar form--or we do not. If not, that leaves two possibilities: (a) no God has issued any directive to the Jews; or (b) if He did, then over thousands of years, through fiddling around by scribes and "redactors," the precise content of the revelation has become uncertain. If (a), then obviously we have no business worshiping the God of Moses or calling ourselves a "chosen people." If (b), then God is not the deity who has been advertised to us from childhood: the Almighty Lord of the Universe. What kind of Almighty is incapable of keeping His revelation intact--of staying, as reporters say of politicians, "on message"--for a mere few millennia?

In a single Being we should not expect to find omnipotence and incompetence. No Torah, no God.

Furthermore, anyone who accepts that the exact text of the Torah was revealed to Moses has no coherent option but to accept the complementary oral Torah, also transmitted by God and later recorded in the Talmud and other rabbinic literature. Highly enigmatic, the Pentateuch is filled with concepts whose meaning is not apparent from context. In the Pentateuch, God will, for example, instruct the Jews to observe the Sabbath, without saying what that entails. He will state that cows and sheep are to be slaughtered for food "as I have commanded you," without mentioning the method.

Are we to believe that the Israelites received no explanation of such matters? Various incoherent answers have been proposed, but only two coherent ones: (a) that the Five Books of Moses were forged by humans to justify the practices of an already existing theocratic regime, and thus no explanation was needed; or (b) that the written Torah was revealed along with an oral companion. Again, answer (a) is incompatible with the Almighty Lord as posited even by Reform clergymen. Such a God would not have to rely on a massive hoax to communicate His will. Answer (b) was the belief of the Jewish people from ancient times.

The conclusion is inescapable: no oral Torah, no God.

Our choice then is between Torah--both Torahs--and the void. As the theologian Will Herberg argued decades ago, where Torah is absent, some other ideology rushes to fill the vacuum left in our souls. We must bow down to something, and there is no shortage of secular "values" available for worship. When, quite innocently, American Jews (or their grandparents) were led away from Torah Judaism, the idols became fruitful and multiplied. Here are a few:

Liberalism, that ideology of the American socioeconomic elite among whom most Jews live and work, reigns as the fattest and smuggest god in our pantheon. For many, the Torah as a source of moral authority has been nudged aside by the editorial page of the New York Times.

Then comes the Holocaust, the veneration of whose victims allows Jews to share in the trendy cult of victimhood. With constant invocations of a fabled nationwide anti-Semitism, scare-mongering groups like the Anti-Defamation League keep this god's altar-fire burning.

When God instructed the Jewish people to seize the land of Israel from its Canaanite inhabitants, He told us to destroy the idols there. Today Israel--or rather the secular state on top of the land of Israel--has replaced Torah in many Jewish minds as the defining interest of the committed Jew, and has become another idol. In their sermons, even some Orthodox rabbis feel compelled to give congregants what they seem to want: less about Torah and more about Israeli politics and the Holocaust.

A fourth god has been constructed in the form of Jewish ethnicity. This is the most insidious because its concerns are hard to distinguish from those of Torah Judaism. Worshipers of the ethnicity idol fret about "continuity" and "unity," threatened respectively by intermarriage and Jews who speak frankly about Jewish idolatry. Ethnicists generally ignore the Torah in their own lives, but praise it as a useful tool for discouraging others from wedding Gentiles. For reasons that are mysterious to me, they believe the continuing existence of a group of people calling themselves "Jews," whatever these Jews happen to believe or not believe about God, should be an urgent priority. All their boosterism has failed to slow the dreaded custom of intermarriage, but who cares? If we have no mission from God, maybe we should all marry Episcopalians, disappear with dignity, and thus quit inflicting ourselves on our Christian neighbors--with our liberalism, our chauvinism, our self-pity.

If, on the other hand, God does have a mission for us, the only hope of convincing our fellow Jews to join in is to begin talking about that mission, and about God, explicitly and publicly, making Judaism itself the principal object of organized Jewish life.

This will never happen, no sizable revival will take place, under the present generation of Jewish leaders, for whom Judaism remains principally a question of ethnicity. Those leaders who have faith are mostly too shy to discuss it in public. Of the ones who do speak openly of Judaism as truth, few venture out of their ghettos to confront the secular world and inspire the cosmopolitan young Jews who desperately need to hear about God and the Torah. (A notable exception to these rules has been Rabbi Daniel Lapin's organization, Toward tradition.)

But even without any concerted help from our elders, thousands of young secular Jews have returned to the understanding of Judaism as a statement of truth about God and man. The baal teshuvah (returnee) phenomenon has been the most significant Jewish event to take place in my lifetime (I am thirty). Hardly a week goes by that I do not meet a person in his twenties or thirties, raised ignorant of Judaism in a Conservative synagogue or Reform temple (as I was), who has be

gun his Jewish education as an adult and considers himself today, as a twenty-eight-year-old I know puts it, a "Jew in training."

"Reishit hokhma, yir'at haShem," says the line in Psalms: "The beginning of wisdom is fear of the Lord." Though generally translated as "fear," yir'ah really means something more like "the awareness that we stand in God's presence." Among the Jews of my generation, one sees more incipient yir'at haShem than in many generations of our American Jewish forebears. A growing number of us believe Judaism is not just useful, but true. With grace from God, the work of tearing down the idols will start with us, and continue with our children.

David Klinghoffer, literary editor of National Review, is writing a 600k about his religious evolution for the Free Press.

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