Jewish Studies and Jewish Faith

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It is about a hundred and fifty years since the passionate and ongoing concern of Jewry with its own past combined with an emerging sense of critical history in the West to create an intense, almost religious pursuit of the history of Judaism among a highly dedicated cadre of Jewish scholars. First in Germany, later in Eastern Europe and elsewhere, the so-called Wissenschaft des Judentums or *hokhmat yisra'el,* the scientific study of Judaism, itself became a major factor in the ideology and self-image of a new breed of *talmidey hakhamim,* Jewish scholars who were not sages in the traditional sense but rather savants specializing in the sources of Judaism, viewing them through a critical-historical lens. While this Wissenschaft sought to proclaim itself a non-ideological, "purely objective" form of scholarship, the wisdom of hindsight allows us to realize that such untainted objectivity in fact eluded all of nineteenth century historiography, the "Science of Judaism" included. Wissenschaft sought to present to the West an image of Judaism as an enlightened, liberal, tolerant faith, the legacy of an unjustly maligned people who even in the darkest hours of persecution had composed dirges and laments in elevated Hebrew style, who had never forsaken their sacred mission, here mostly interpreted as one of human ennoblement through cultural creativity. The emerging self-image of German Jews as the embodiment of *Bildung* or enlightened edification, of which George Mosse and others have written, was buttressed by the image of what the true Judaism had been all along, as selected and presented by Wissenschaft scholars.

The emergence of Wissenschaft also brought forth in the Jewish domain a new concept of the scholar himself, one quite alien to the spirit of Judaism throughout its history. I speak here of the bifurcation between sage and scholar, between the pursuit of wisdom and that of learning, and ultimately between the study of Torah as a religious obligation and the forging of scholarly research into a surrogate religion of its own. Throughout prior Western history, in Christian and Islamic as well as Jewish circles, learning and wisdom were to be pursued as a single goal. True, there were "fools within the domain of Torah," but it was the yeshivah or bet midrash alongside the monastery and the madrasa that preserved learning in the West for a thousand years or more. The Renaissance humanist, layman though he might be, was a continuer of this tradition, one who sought to be edified and made wise by learning. But it was a partially tragic by-product of the struggle of universities and scholars to free themselves from ecclesiastical control, a struggle with which we may well sympathize, that sage and scholar were to be divorced in the Western mind. The scholar was now to be responsible only to his own *ecclesia,* the temple of learning with its high alter of objectivity, approachable only through the very sort of critical self-distancing from the materials studied that ultimately was to render the personal search for wisdom an illegitimate one in the university. Thus were some thousands of the finest and most searching young minds to enter a state of voluntary exile from the West in the late twentieth century, turning to the ashram, the zendo, and, yes, even to the yeshivah to seek that which the university could not permit itself to provide.

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The Jewish scholar remained, to be sure, something of a stepchild in the German academic universe. Judaica was not taught in the great universities of Germany, whose theological faculties to this day exist either under Catholic or Protestant auspices. Where it was taught, it was as a form of research into Oriental or ancient languages and cultures rather than as religion. Most Jewish scholarship was carried on under Jewish auspices in independent theological seminaries, great centers of learning that flourished in Berlin, Breslau, Vienna and elsewhere for nearly a century. Here rabbinic training itself was in varying degrees converted into Wissenschaft, and the ideal central

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European rabbi, at least of the liberal variety, was a *Rabbiner Doktor* who would, at very least, author a monograph on the history of Jewry in his own region, if not undertaking research in some more esoteric academic subject. This combination of scholarship and rabbinic career lent a strong apologetic coloring to the supposedly objective study of Judaism: in fact both the rabbi himself and the Judaism he professed were lent respectability by the academic robes in which they were garbed.

In America, Jewish scholarship existed only in rudimentary form until the eve of the Second World War. The faculties of the Jewish Theological Seminary and Hebrew Union College included a number of first-rate scholars, almost all of them trained in Europe. A few lone individuals, most notably Harry Austryn Wolfson at Harvard and Salo Baron at Columbia, were forging careers for themselves in the more open American secular academy, but their impact upon the masses of Jewish immigrants and their children was nil. It was only the forced migration of Judaica scholars in the Hitler era, as a part of the general wandering of the German Jewish intelligentia to America, that laid the groundwork for the emergence of Jewish Studies as an academic area that has seen such tremendous growth in this country since the 1960's. That same emigration also took a major portion of European Judaica scholarship to Erez Israel, making the Hebrew University in Jerusalem the world's greatest single center for research in this field.

The emigre scholars found in America a situation of rare openness to the growth and acceptance of their interests. A breed of young American Jews, mostly third generation, were anxious to absorb their rather more profound, and certainly more theologically sophisticated, versions of Jewish learning than those otherwise available on the American scene. The same universities which had worked to exclude Jews only a few decades earlier were and are still vying with one another to offer programs in Jewish Studies. I am not entirely sanguine about the reasons for this sudden love affair with Judaica research. I believe that smart development officers, at about the time financial crisis due to rising costs hit the universities, made the judgement that Jews were a population of high income and great willingness to spend large sums for education, both for their own children and toward the maintenance of those institutions where they were welcomed. Judaic Studies courses had at least the partial effect of an advertising campaign addressed to Jewish parents and donors, saying with the proper veneer of academic elegance: "Your dollars welcome here!" This calculation was encouraged both by the growing respectability of ethnic identity in general in the late 60's, and by the wave of philo-Semitism that characterized most thinking American Christians, including those who ran departments of religion in the universities, as they began to come to terms with the question of Christian responsibility for the holocaust. Hence, beginning in the 1960's, the chief locus of Judaic research in the United States shifted from the theological seminaries to departments of religion, near east studies, history, and so forth in the secular universities.

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Scholars themselves viewed this new acceptance of Judaica in the general academy with joy. Not only did it make for tremendous growth, jobs for their students, increased research, grants, and so forth; it was also the final realization of the Wissenschaft dream. Judaica had come into its own, celebrating in the American academy a degree of legitimacy it had never been able to achieve in Europe. The cost of this acceptance was only dimly perceived at first, and has become truly apparent only after some decades of living with the new situation. To say it succinctly, Jewish scholarship can no longer serve as the handmaiden of Jewish apologetics. The university scholar, unlike his seminary colleague, cannot teach that Judaism is the unique repository of truth, that it is "better," either morally or theologically, than other faiths, or even comfortably preach the values of its continued existence. To be sure, the very fact of teaching Judaism, including Hebrew sources, to new generations of students does make for Jewish continuity. But the content of the professors' message can hardly dare to allow itself to be the same as that of the rabbis. Here the content of objective research has caught up with itself, and its implications can no longer be ignored.

Critical scholarship has accepted since its inception that Judaism has undergone change and evolution, has known that the religion of Jeremiah was not that of Akiva or Maimonides, and that outside influences and cultural setting have had tremendous impact on the religious life of Jewry. But as long as seminary and rabbi were the bearers of this learning, its implications did not have to be fully faced. A critical Talmudist could avoid the knotty problems caused by Biblical criticism; for his research, the canon was acceptable as a *fait accompli*. One could show, in that setting, how Judaism had encountered paganism, Agnosticism, or Greek philosophy, and had "triumphed" with a new and higher religious synthesis. But in the general university such manipulations were out of place. Just as we would not want to see our religion department colleagues of Catholic or Protestant backgrounds advocating the superiority of their faiths, celebrating the "triumphs" of Catholicism or Lutheranism over all their foes, we Jews of the academy have learned to be cautious about our own uncritical enthusiasm for Judaism. This is why many a Jewish parent has been disappointed by the inability of the Jewish Studies professor to provide "answers" to the personal dilemmas and Jewish ambivalences of the young. The truth is that we put these scholars in a terribly difficult position, glorying in their efforts to have Judaica treated as a full member of the university curriculum, but then treating them as though they were our personal representatives on the college campus. It is hard to have it both ways, though some of us scholars have probably revelled in that dual role which gives expression to our own ambivalences.

But the secular university as a setting for Jewish Studies has made yet another demand, one still more pernicious from the viewpoint of traditional Judaism. Not only must we set aside our preference for Judaism over other faiths or truth or value systems; we are also forced to "bracket" for the purposes of teaching and research our faith in God itself. The methods by which religion is studied in the university are those of history and philology, part of the traditional humanities curriculum, and, increasingly over the past decades, anthropology, psychology, and sociology, from the social sciences. While some naive souls still claim these as value-free academic methods (as value-free as was the older Jewish Wissenschaft!), when applied to a historical and revelation-centered faith such as Judaism, their impact is devastating. There is no place for religion as a divine rather than a human creation in the general academic community. A scholar who submitted an article to the Journal of the American Academy of Religion or the Journal of Biblical Literature assuming that Scripture was quite literally the Word of God would be a laughing stock. To be sure, there are journals where such assumptions are welcome, but these are sustained almost exclusively by faculty in evangelical seminaries rather than in recognized university departments.

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To say it directly, then, Jewish Studies in the academic mode deny that the Torah is the revealed word of God. This disbelief, characterizing most of non-Orthodox Jewry and not a few unhappy would-be Orthodox souls since the dawn of modernity, is confirmed by scholarship in countless ways. The inner inconsistency of the Biblical text, noted already by Jewish interpreters of the Middle Ages, is added to a great mound of archaeological evidence and, most significantly, to comparative studies. What does a pious Jew do when he learns that there are other groups in the Ancient Near East who claim that their gods gave them books from heaven? That the ascent to the mountain-peak where the sky opens and the hero is taken into heaven is an old Babylonian tale? That the figure of Moses himself, from the tales of his birth to the radiance of his face, fits into patterns of myth well-documented among human communities far and wide?

One possibility, of course, is that of intellectual gamesmanship. "God, in giving the Torah, intentionally used patterns well-established among humans for purposes of His own" or "God caused societies throughout the world to develop patterns of this sort in order to prepare humanity to receive His Torah." But these are sufficiently straining of credibility to work only for those who really need them, whose commitments to faith are made for reasons other than these, and who then use them as buttressing.

Most modern Jews have long ago given in on this issue. We do no believe our religion to be "true" in the way that the medievals would have had it. Many of us, however, still cling to a sense of Judaism's uniqueness, despite our literal disbelief in its revealed character. In the tradition of Ahad ha-Am or Yehezkel Kaufmann we consider the Bible and the rabbinic tradition to be the greatest of human creations in the realm of religion, and the Jews to be uniquely "chosen", in some mostly undefined sense, as the singular bearers of holiness in the world. This sense of absolute uniqueness is also borne away by the study of Judaism and Jewish history in a comparative context. The open-minded scholar who has had any contact either with the Tibetan or Hopi Indian traditions, to name but two, is forced to realize that we are not alone in claiming to be a civilization dedicated to the divine and bringing a religious message of great power, creativity, and depth to the human race. Of course we are unique, in the sense that each of these religious cultures has a particular character nowhere exactly duplicated. The combination of elements that makes for Judaism exists nowhere else in the world. But the same can be said for any of the greater or lesser faith-traditions of humankind.

This is not to say that the effect of scholarship on the faith of Judaism is entirely corrosive—not at all. I believe it provides for a clearing of the air and helps to set Jewish theology on a creative and modern—or post-modern—course. No longer able to base our religious life on a historical or pseudo-historical claim, we are forced to seek out other foundations for the Jewish religious continuity to which we, as a living community, remain committed. While the claims of the tradition may not be historically valid, they remain valid in a much more existentially important way: in the magnetic power they still have for us, in the richness of insight we still find in them, in the familiar intimacy with which they still address the Jew who stands open to them. Our Judaism is forced to confront the truly *religious* character of its power in our lives.

We will probably never know, historically, which if any of the tribes that made up ancient Israel was ever in Egypt . . . . but we know the reality of *yetsi'at mitsrayim.* Just ask any survivor of the camps in Europe if the Exodus is a reality.

The *mishkan* or tabernacle in the wilderness may never have existed, according to the scholars, but may have been an idealized retrojection from Temple or even post-Temple times. But the *mishkan* in the heart, the true tabernacle according, at least, to the Hasidic masters, that one surely exists, for you and I have been there. On the altar in that *mishkan* Jews still offer their daily verbal sacrifices, one in the morning, one in the evening.

There may never have been—in history—an Abraham, an Isaac, or an event at Mount Moriah, but have we Jews not been witness to a thousand Akedahs and more?

We do not know that Sinai itself happened as the Bible says it did. But how many of us in our lives as religiously sensitive Jews have not stood in that stillness and heard, if not the thundering sounds of Moses' Sinai, at least the still small voice of Elijah's?

All this is to say that the truth of religion inhabits a universe of discourse quite entirely different than that of history, and a separation of their claims from entanglement with one another will ultimately be helpful. The great happenings recorded in our Scriptures should in the proper sense be seen as mythical, that is as paradigms to help us encounter, explain, and enrich by archaic association the deepest experiences of which we as humans are capable. We do or do not feel ourselves commanded to live the life of the *mitsvot* not because God did or did not dictate them to Moses on the mountaintop long ago, but because we as Jews, a living faith community in the present, feel ourselves touched by a transcendent presence that is made real in our lives through the fulfillment of these forms. Or do not. It is in faith, the struggle to realize the divine presence in our lives as individuals and as a Jewish people, not in history, where the core of our Judaism must reside.

Many of us who engage in Jewish Studies using the methods of the secular academy are ourselves, in one way or another, committed Jews who take our religion seriously. Sometimes we feel constrained to wear two hats, that of the academic and that of the Jew. Yet we find it hard to bifurcate our minds along the lines suggested by the Orthodox scientist. Dealing as scholars with the very sources that our tradition considers holy, we are not able to say "this is science; that is religion." Even in terms of the motivation that brought us to careers in Jewish scholarship, such a separation is impossible for us. The same love for the tradition and the Jewish past that lies at the heart of our personal commitment to Judaism is what brought us to a life of studying these sources, even in the critical mode. And in a way that it is sometimes hard for the positivist within us to appreciate, our love of these sources and commitment to them are in no way diminished by the critical or comparative methods with which we study them.

Recent development within the academy itself are beginning to point the way toward a resolution of this dilemma. Scholars of religion are beginning to speak of the need to study religion *in its own terms*, and are viewing its interpretation in the language of the social sciences as inappropriately reductionistic. This is not to say that they support the truth claims of any particular tradition, but that they recognize the religious as representing a unique domain of human experience that cannot be explained away by reference to social or psychological needs. To misappropriate a Talmudic rubric, *ha-peh she-asar hu ha-peh she-hittir,* the same academy that denies the legitimacy of religion on one level may support it on another. In its retreat from functionalist modes of explaining all human behavior, including religion, part of the academy is admitting, with much caution, that the great religious and mythical systems represent insightful mappings of the human psyche, and that their teachings, while not reflecting accurate history, geology, astronomy, or physics, do offer the one who knows to read them a profound view of the collective inner experience of humanity.

Until this point we have been treating the Jewish tradition as though it were a monolith, bearing a certain total set of truth-claims that must be either accepted, rejected, or, as we have now proposed, re-read on another level. But it is precisely in seeing Judaism and the Jewish experience as varied, rather than monolithic, that Jewish scholarship has made what is perhaps its most important contribution. It is here that I want to concentrate the remainder of my remarks.

A history of Judaism from the point of view of the phenomenology of religion has yet to be written. The ways in which classic patterns of myth, symbol, and archetype survived the great transformations wrought by Biblical religion and reappeared, *mutatis mutandis,* in rabbinic and later Judaism, are yet to be fully traced. The unique element of diaspora, spreading the Jews throughout the Western world at an early and crucial stage in our religion's development also needs here to be taken into account. The traditions that grew out of that monotheistic and iconoclastic revolution in ancient Canaan, overlaid with memories of Babylonian exile and its Persian aftermath as well as with evidence of early contacts with Greece and Rome, were carried throughout the known world by bands of faithful wanderers. Yet who would dare say that Judaism, even of the most pious and traditionalist sort, remained unaffected by the cultural patterns of those in whose midst particular groups of Jews happened to settle? It is not at all clear that a Jew in Spain of the twelfth century and one in Poland or Bohemia some five hundred years later, even if performing the very same ritual actions, were in fact "doing the same thing" from the phenomenologist's point of view. Distinctive religious subcultures emerged within the history of Jewry. Even in latter-day terms, if one thinks of Lithuania, Italy, and Yemen, highly diverse images of Judaism come to mind. These, it should be added, were not necessarily mirror-images of the non-Jewish cultures amid which they flourished. Jewish communities themselves, separated by distances of both time and space, created cultural and religious life-patterns that differed seriously both from one another and from the "host" cultures in whose shadows they existed. Any account of the spiritual life of Jewry undoubtedly is in need of the word "varieties" somewhere in its title.

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What is it then that the co-inhabitants of this religious and cultural phenomenon known as Judaism have in common? First it must be said that they are all Jews, and this is no mere tautology. Judaism is the religious path of a distinct national group, one that has defined itself in ethnic as well as religious terms throughout the ages. The shared legacy of national symbols, including language, land (held dear, as history has shown, despite long absence), and common history, is quite inseparable from Jewish religious identity. Yet the historian of religion must probe further, asking what it is within this legacy of the past that makes for the vital and ongoing thread of Judaism as a religious enterprise. In this search, one is first tempted to go the route of essentialism: somewhere at the core there must be an "essence of Judaism" that all its bearers hold in common. This was, in fact, the path taken by most presentations of Judaism for the Western reader in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Of course this essence was usually articulated in theological terms, and then often in terms not unsurprisingly accommodating either to the writer's particular stance within the Jewish religious community or to the properly liberal and Western values which an author might have thought his readers would find most comfortable. Thus ethical monotheism, the struggle against idolatry, and a vague commitment to the "rule of law"—though not to particular laws—were emphasized by liberal Jewish writers, while *halakhah* in its specific sense, but also expanded to "the halakhic mind", was brought to the fore by traditionalists.

Aside from the obviously self-serving quality of some of these presentations, the attempts at arriving at such an essence have been largely discredited in Jewish scholarly circles due to recent development in historical research. Essentialism always wound up positing a "mainstream" in the history of Jewry; those who diverged from the ideal were then characterized as minor "fringe" groups of dissenters, ultimately to be cut off from the ongoing stream of Jewish history. But the work of mid-twentieth century Jewish scholarship has almost entirely discredited the notion of any theological mainstream. Erwin R. Goodenough, researching the archaeological remains of Jewry throughout the Eastern Mediterranean world, gave the lie to the widely held view that a rabbinic "mainstream", puritanical, iconoclastic, and uncompromisingly anti-syncretistic, dominated Palestinian and Babylonian Jewry in the first centuries of the common era. Harry A. Wolfson has shown how thoroughly Jewish philosophers from Philo to Spinoza were part and parcel of the Western philosophical tradition, often having more in common intellectually with their Christian and especially Muslim counterparts than they did with Jews who stood outside philosophy. Above all, Gershom Scholem and his studies of medieval Jewish mysticism and seventeenth-century Sabbatian messianism have had a revolutionary impact on the field of Jewish Studies as a whole. Scholem has forced us to realize that the notions of "mainstream" were posited largely out of ignorance and sustained by the selective suppression of evidence, reflecting cultural biases to which historians, only slightly less than theologians, were themselves subject.

What, then, if not theological essentials, serves as the binding substance for the variety of Jewish spiritual expressions? It seems safe to begin with the *text* itself. All Judaisms since approximately the first century C.E. have had in common a defined body of sacred Scripture. Though exegetical license has indeed reigned free, it is not fair to assume that the text has made no claims on those who are faithful to it. These claims, the ones least bendable by interpretation, exist first in the realm of religious deed and second, but by no means insignificantly, in that of religious language, imagery, and style.

The relative unanimity of pre-modern Jews in matters of religious action, codified as *halakhah* or the "path" is well-known. The commandments of the Torah as defined and elaborated by the early rabbis were accepted as binding by all Jews, excepting the Karaite minority, at least from the early middle ages down to the seventeenth century, and in most cases later. There were, to be sure, ongoing debates both as to the details of the law and in the seemingly large matter of just what constituted the six hundred and thirteen commandments of the Torah itself. But these were dwarfed by the overwhelming unanimity in most matters of praxis. It was this uniformity of life-pattern that allowed for Moses Mendelsohn's claim in the eighteenth century that Judaism was in fact a matter of "revealed legislation", allowing, of course, precisely for the wide berth of intellectual freedom that he as an enlightener sought. This view of Judaism, though thoroughly discredited by the nineteenth century essentialists, was based in the reality of long experience with one aspect of the tradition, the relative unanimity of deed and form.

Deeds, of course, are an aspect of symbolic speech, especially so when they take the regularized and repeated form of ritual. Alongside this type of speech-act, then, contemporary scholarship suggests that Judaism (like any religious tradition) has a unique pattern of verbal tropes and rubrics that constitute a unifying style of expression, one that transcends even great chasms in theological meaning. Any theology of Judaism, for example, must claim to believe in God; monotheism is embodied in the essential trope of *shema' yisra'el.* A theology that denies the truth of the *shema'* or openly proclaims belief in a multiplicity of heavenly powers can hardly claim a place within Judaism. But the range of meaning given to the *shema'* remains quite open; the One may be the unity of ten powers, as for the Kabbalist, or the *shema'* may attest to the absolute oneness of God and world, as for the HaBaD *hasid.* The fact that both of these views stand in utter contradiction to the theology of the Hebrew Bible constitutes no real problem for their being a part of Judaism, but stands rather as a monument to the exegetical "success" and freedom of these latter-day thinkers.

Another such basic trope is the belief in *Torah min ha-shamayim,* the revelation of Torah. Again, a Judaism without some sort of revelation-theology is inconceivable, but the range of beliefs as to exactly what was given at Sinai or was spoken by what sort of divine voice, or the degrees of difference between inspiration, creativity, and revelation, is tremendous. This is especially so if one takes into account the great variety of modern Jewish positions on the matter, but is true also within the classical sources to a surprising degree, as shown in the writings of the late Abraham Joshua Heschel. Realistically speaking, the rabbinic claim that one must believe that each and every word was divine comes down to mean that whoever can find no place for *some* concept of *Torah min ha-shamayim* has rejected an essential rubric of Jewish discourse, thus placing himself outside the theological concensus of Israel.

Do we then propose naught but a new essentialism, one of tropes and rubrics rather than one of dogmas and ideas? It should not be difficult to compile a list of essential religious vocabulary of which the would-be Jewish theologian could make rather free use. Of course the matter is not quite so simple. Having used rather obvious and easily-labelled examples, what we speak of is really a literary and theological *style,* one carried in part by the mention of certain key terms, but hardly reducible to them. The ways in which the terms are used, the frequency with which they appear, how they are juxtaposed with one another, and a whole host of other more-or-less intangibles collectively constitute the religious language of Judaism. The well-trained eye of a text scholar or ear of a "native speaker" learns to detect unusual patterns, shifts in meaning, changes of emphasis, even in the seemingly most standard bits of rabbinic discourse. Especially interesting here are two late genres of pre-modern Jewish theological literature. Scholem's studies of the seventeenth and eighteenth century documents in which Sabbatian heresy was masked behind the language of traditional piety are instructive in illuminating the outermost limits of Jewish religious language and the ways in which even an exaggeratedly pietistic Jewish style can be distorted to produce radically new meanings. Similarly, the literature of Hasidism, though hardly "heretical" in the same way, offers the careful reader a chance to explore the traditional language and style of Judaism pushed to the extreme, as the masters used it to legitimize the particular religious values for which they stood.

The Judaism that all held in common was, we are claiming, a shared religious language, rooted in a body of sacred Scripture and anchored to daily life by a prescribed pattern of deeds. Like any language in currency over a wide geographical area and through the course of many centuries, it evolved, changed, grew, and developed its own varied "dialects." A multiplicity of religious types found within it sufficient breadth and depth to express their differences of vision and understanding; even those labelled as "sinners" or "heretics" in times of controversy continued to make use, often the most creative use, of this religious language.

In modern times, of course, the language itself has suffered a serious challenge, as the weakening of its own faith-claims combined with the tremendous assimilatory pressures on Jewry to greatly diminish the hold it has on the Jewish people. As we enter the post-modern era we encounter great numbers of Jewish religious seekers who are strangers to this language and struggle to place themselves in relation to it. Here too the contribution of scholarship may prove to be a positive one. By demonstrating the remarkable flexibility and room for growth this language has shown in the past, we may provide the paradigm for the needed growth, expansion, and new creativity that it will have to embrace if it is to serve the Jewish people as they face a dramatically new and yet uncertain future. ☐

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WHY TIKKUN?

Michael Lerner, editor

The notion that the world could and should be very different has deep roots within Judaism and the Jewish tradition. But in the late 1980's it is an idea that seems strangely out of fashion. . .

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