

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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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 mid-

dle of those chapters in Exodus on the Tabernacle, "If you build it, they will come"?

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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