

New age of Judaism, marked by freedom, poses new challenges

THE RABBI'S TURN RABBI ARTHUR GREEN

We stand at the edge of a new age in the history of the Jewish people. However one chooses to define or divide the periods of Jewish history, it is clear to any observer that the great changes wrought by the 20th century mean that we face a new and unprecedented future.

A Jewish life characterized by the free State of Israel and its revival of our ancient language and culture, by a Diaspora Jewry living in a free society where Jewish association is almost entirely voluntary, and by an age in which the preservation of group identity is by no means a given for most of our children — all of these mean that the conditions of our existence have been entirely transformed.

The Judaism by which we live will surely have to reflect and respond to the challenges of these new conditions.

A century of migration, destruction and transformation has left the Jewish people in an unprecedented situation. The open society of North America is host to our largest communities. A proud and free, though still threatened, Israel is the center of our people's national renewal and cultural rebirth. Our problems, in both of these settings, are the challenges of freedom rather than the burdens of oppression.

How does a free Jewish people commit itself to remaining faithful to our identity and tradition? How do we Jews survive freedom when it includes the freedom *not* to be Jewish? Living in a world of infinite choices and seemingly unlimited personal freedoms, how do we determine what to preserve and renew of our Jewish heritage and what to relegate to the past? How do we create a Jewish life that will be vital and exciting to generations still to come?

Our task is complicated by the fact that the Jewish people is reconstituting itself before our eyes. While many descendants of Jews continue to assimilate and disappear from the Jewish people, whole limbs are being added to the body politic of world Jewry. Our Soviet brothers and sisters, long considered lost to the Jewish people, are returning. The same is true of Ethiopian Jews.

In this country, large numbers of enthusiastic and highly

committed Jews by choice are being added to the Jewish people. While some Jews continue to drift away, large numbers of children and grandchildren of Jewish or partly Jewish families are rediscovering their lost identities and seeking a way to return home.

Elderly Jews, single Jews, divorced Jews, gay and lesbian Jews — all of these many kinds of Jews and their special needs will have to be kept in mind as the Jewish people plans its agenda for the 21st century.

Reconstructionists believe we live in a time of great opportunity in Jewish history. A period that once looked like a time of unmitigated assimilation and decline now turns out to be an age of Jewish renewal for those who seek it. For Jewish life to be viable in the 21st century, three key issues must be tackled: Jewish unity, Jewish literacy, Jewish spiritual renewal.

- Jewish unity: It is time for the entire Jewish people, both in Israel and throughout the Diaspora, to come together and work for the preservation of our identity and the shared heritage we all hold dear. The diversity within the Jewish people must come to be seen as a strength rather than a weakness. That which unites us is much stronger and deeper than any divisions between us.

We should invite all Jews to work together for the future of the Jewish people. That future must be determined democratically by all who wish to participate in its shaping. We should call for a series of ongoing seminars and symposia — local, regional and international — in which the Jewish people will come together to talk out our differences and to begin building our future.

- Jewish literacy: We should call upon Jews everywhere to begin a massive campaign for the teaching of basic Hebrew, Jewish knowledge and Jewish skills. In an age when general higher education is almost universal among Jews, it is disgraceful that such basics as the Hebrew alphabet and the key vocabulary of Jewish life should be unknown even to some who are in positions of leadership.

We should ask that every synagogue, school and Jewish community center of any denomination throughout the world engage in teaching Jewish literacy and the vocabulary of Jewish life. We should commit ourselves to producing materials for such instruction and collaborate with any and all in those efforts.

- Spiritual renewal: For large numbers of Jews, the age of religious

skepticism and faith in the ability of modern society to solve all their problems is giving way to a period of new respect for ancient wisdom and the richness of tradition.

Reconstructionists are Jews who seek a way to reclaim tradition and the heritage of our past. While not liberal believers in the mythic aspects of Jewish faith, we sense the need for spiritual expression and long to find it within Judaism. We need a language of prayer that is at once richly traditional and intelligible to modern and post-modern Jews. We need a theology that is both profound and believable, a style of Jewish living that calls forth rich commitment without being overly restrictive or isolating for Jews who see themselves as living fully within the contemporary world.

We need to live in a community of Jews who care for one another as individuals and as families, Jews who share warmth and closeness in times of grief and in times of joyous celebration.

This is the Judaism that Reconstructionism seeks to create. In our synagogues and havurot, in studies at our rabbinical college, in books we write and publish, in our new prayer books and in our magazine, we should offer to seeking Jews a language of faith that combines the full richness of tradition with the excitement and newness of tomorrow.

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