



**SMASHING IDOLS**

**AND OTHER PRESCRIPTIONS  
FOR JEWISH CONTINUITY**

**Leonard Fein**

The Nathan Cummings Foundation, New York

1994

Leonard Fein, a writer and teacher, is a veteran participant-observer of American Jewish life. He was the first director of the Hornstein Program in Jewish Communal Service at Brandeis University, where he also served as the Klutznick Family Professor of Contemporary Jewish Studies. In 1975 he founded *Moment* magazine, which he served as editor-in-chief and publisher until 1987. In 1985, he founded *Mazon: A Jewish Response to Hunger*. A political scientist by training, his books include *Politics in Israel* (1967) and *Where Are We? The Inner Life of America's Jews* (1988). In 1970, he was principal author of *Reform Is A Verb*, a study of the Reform movement. In addition to his other books and his columns and articles in *Moment* and in the *Forward*, where his weekly OpEd column has appeared since the paper's inception in 1990, he has written some hundreds of essays and articles for a wide variety of magazines, newspapers, and journals.

Among his honors, he was, in 1994, the first recipient of the National Foundation for Jewish Culture award for achievement in Jewish scholarship (contemporary studies).

He has been a board member of or consultant to many Jewish organizations, including the New Israel Fund, Boston's Combined Jewish Philanthropies, the National Jewish Democratic Council, and the Religious Action Center, the public affairs arm of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, where he has served since 1987 as Senior Visiting Scholar.

Fein has also been Deputy Director of the MIT/Harvard Joint Center for Urban Studies, professor of political science at MIT, professor of politics and public policy at the Florence Heller School for Advanced Graduate Studies in Social Welfare at Brandeis, and has consulted widely on public schools, urban problems, and human rights.

## FOREWORD

The Jewish Life Program of The Nathan Cummings Foundation is proud to publish Leonard Fein's monograph. The Foundation's intent in distributing it widely is to stimulate discussion of its analysis and its argument; our hope is that out of such discussion, an array of new initiatives will follow. For with Fein, we believe that the vitality of the American Jewish community in the coming decades depends on an enhanced commitment to social justice, and with him we believe that the integrity of the community is assured when such activism is intimately linked to study, to spirituality, and to acts of lovingkindness.

Fein's principal focus is on Jewish connections in our time, and on the role that a refreshed commitment to Jewish values might—and therefore should—play in strengthening those connections. As Fein says, "The Jewish community has no more urgent interest than the energetic pursuit of its values."

The monograph is particularly timely in light of the prevailing anxiety regarding Jewish continuity. A concern for Jewish continuity does not, in and of itself, provide an adequate agenda for Jewish communal life. As Leon Wieselter has observed, it remains our duty "to choose among Jewishnesses." That choice, Fein urges, should favor "Jewishnesses" that embrace the pursuit of social justice.

Specifically, Fein calls for renewed attention to the quality of the community as a nurturing home for its members and for a more articulate and sturdier devotion to the work of *tikkun olam*, mending the world, on the part of the community. Both these emphases are worthy in their own right; together, they are powerful engines of Jewish continuity.

Rachel Cowan  
Director, Jewish Life Program  
The Nathan Cummings Foundation

INTRODUCTION:  
THE CRISIS OF THE ORDINARY

Ever since the dawn of the Enlightenment 200 years ago, we have been confronted by modernity's challenge: Can the Jews survive in an open society, where Judaism is transformed from a condition into an option? And then, by implication, how can we survive, and why ought we survive?

In most of the places we have dwelled, the questions remained largely hypothetical; modernity did not deliver its full promise, and Judaism remained more an assignment than a free choice. Even in America, modernity's heartland, true freedom of choice unfolded only gradually; the match between the nation's rhetoric and the Jewish reality is a recent (and still imperfect) achievement.

Still, the questions are not new, even if the challenges they pose have until now been for the most part potential rather than actual. Yet the events of this past century have inhibited our capacity to respond to them. There has been little calm for America's Jews between the storms and squalls of Jewish history these past six decades and more. Questions of Jewish identity (or continuity, or survival) have again and again been displaced by the exigencies of the day. Indeed, crisis has so often intervened that it has come to seem our normal condition. We'd been taught that Jewish history from its earliest days was a series of towering events, and so it has seemed in our own time, too, from the unbearable darkness of the Kingdom of Night to the birth pains and the uncertain early years of the Republic of Hope. Exile and redemption, ashes and rebirth—these were not distant metaphors but near-daily experience. How then muster the energy to devote sustained attention to nagging and persistent questions which, no matter their importance, lacked all drama, paled in the face of recurrent emergency? We were a small people, but very large things kept happening to us, and it was those large things that seemed to require our immediate response.

Now, it appears, we are at the beginning of a very different time, an ordinary time. Suddenly, peace between Israel and its neighbors has been transformed into something more than a prayerful yearning; not speedily, to be sure, but yes, quite possibly in our time. Antisemitism, for all that it here and there retains its malevolent bite, is no longer the sinister companion of Jewish life; more often, it is experienced merely as a distant irritant. The tales of woe and of wonder recede, replaced by the mundane.

And now, therefore, the long-neglected crisis of Jewish identity and of Jewish continuity is upon us. Yes, there may yet be another Entebbe, or another Six Day War, or even, heaven forbid, another pogrom, somewhere, to startle us and refresh the sense of Jewish drama. (As if to confirm the ever-present possibility, the preceding words were drafted before the bombing in Buenos Aires.) But in the main, we are likely now (or soon enough) to be left to our own devices, with external factors coming as occasional reminders of how it used to be rather than as the determinants of how it is. If our future as a people is to be assured, we must learn to live on our own, off-stage.

There are, to be sure, other ways of defining the present moment in Jewish time. These days, the most popular definition derives from the disturbing data of the 1990 National Jewish Population Study, with continuity itself emerging as the crisis of the day. But whether one starts the story two hundred years ago or just yesterday, the conclusion is the same: It is manifestly time to reconsider our direction as a community. The old categories and the old responses are tired, played out, inadequate to our emerging circumstance.

In the pages that follow, I attempt to say why that is so, and I then propose an old-new way (for there is nothing truly new under the sun) of defining the challenges we face and their implications for our communal agenda.

## I. HOW DID WE GET HERE?

### History, the Modern Way

The premise: We have (at last) reached a time when being Jewish has been transformed from a condition into an option.

In the world we inhabit, the modern world, it is widely accepted (at least in theory) that personal identity is open to personal choice. Where choice is not yet real, modernity insists it be made real. But Judaism, historically, has not been chosen; it has been either inherited or assigned. Judaism has not been an option; it has been a condition.

How does the Jewish community manage the transition to the modern understanding? By and large, by denying it: Though the door to choice, to "the world out there," has been unlocked, and though very many people have walked through it, the "official" stance of the community is that we are obliged to stay confined to our own room. And more: It is to pretend the door's still locked lest our children, leaning against it, discover that it opens easily. It's to pretend that the door's still locked—or to assert that what's outside the door is not worth knowing.

So, at least, until now. But now, at least in North America, modernity's troubled palace, news that the door is unlocked cannot be kept a secret any more, and Judaism has become, at last, the option that in a genuinely open society it was bound one day to become.

That is nothing less than a revolution in the Jewish condition, perhaps the single most important since Israel's rebirth as a sovereign Jewish state.

### A. Generations

For the earliest generations of America's Jews, those for whom Judaism and their own Jewish identities had in Europe been a

fixed condition, America, the land of endless choices, was a new and different and unsettling place. But the truth is that they did not come to this open society, to this world of choice, unformed. They were the products of families and communities that had marked them, and deeply, and while they might play around the fringes of choice, they were neither so malleable nor was America so open in fact as to render Judaism truly optional. By and large, they were happiest, most comfortable, in the Jewish room, and the issue of whether the door was locked or open was not of interest to them.

Their offspring of the second and third generations found the boundaries somewhat more permeable, both because of changes in America and because of changes in their own conditioning. Their field of choice was broader, more crowded with possibility. But they still had their parents and grandparents at hand, and they had the additional advantage—or burden, depending on one's perspective—that they grew up during a time when the fact of Jewishness was essentially inescapable, a time of cataclysmic events in our people's unfolding story. The door might well be unlocked, but it would be dishonorable to walk through it.<sup>1</sup>

The fourth generation was and is inevitably more at home in America, more available for choice. Deaf to the implicit assumptions of its progenitors, unmarked by distant yesterdays, offended by Jewish quarrels, bored by the endless rhetoric of Jewish emergency, heir only to the thin associational Jewishness of its

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<sup>1</sup> So, for example, Irving Howe in his autobiography, *A Margin of Hope*: "[Judaism] was simply *there*. While it would be shameful to deny its presence or seek to flee its stigma, my friends and I could hardly be said to have thought Jewishness could do much for us or we for it." But the Holocaust and Israel changed that indifference for many people. Philip Rahv bequeathed his estate to Israel upon his death two months after the Yom Kippur War; Sidney Hook, who recalled that as a child "Judaism seemed mainly a mass of superstitions taught by tyrannical old men," as an adult defended Israel's 1982 invasion of Lebanon. Alfred Kazin, who had earlier revolted against "sentimental chauvinism," went on in his *New York Jew* to describe the Holocaust as the consuming event of his life, as also his trip to Israel after the Six-Day War. And popular attitudes, though never as clearly limned as they were by "the New York intellectuals," were not altogether different.

parents, innocent of Jewish culture except in the form of once-upon-a-time stories, it is finally able, perhaps even eager, to wall through the door, to enter the American super-market and there to select what it will, and it enters that super-market insensitive to the nostalgic pull of the goods stacked somewhat sloppily in the Jewish aisle. Why spend its discretionary income on such merchandise when other options, usually priced lower and packaged more seductively, beckon? What authentic needs might thereby be satisfied, what real and not merely symbolic benefits achieved?

To such questions, the Jewish communal response is still a second and third generation response. Instinctively, we seek to redefine the issue, we seek to fight yesterday's war. And so our effort is to resist Judaism's new optionality, to restrict the opportunity for choice. We do what little we can to deprecate the alternatives, but the heart of our effort is to constrain the chooser, so thoroughly to immerse the Jew in Jewish ways that he or she will scarcely notice there's another world, and then another and yet another, just outside our unlocked doors, no visa required. Make being Jewish so instinctive a habit, and perhaps we will luck out and our children will not ask us, "Why? Why bother?" Make Jewish our first language, and all our angels will inevitably look homeward.

But the other world inevitably intrudes; there's no vaccine against it. So far are we from being able to immerse our children in Judaism that the overwhelming majority of them are light-years more fluent in the language of modernity; for the fourth generation, Judaism is at best an acquired language, hardly their mother tongue.

Immersion doesn't work in practice; moreover, it's flawed in theory. It is an act of cowardice to defend Judaism by opposing modernity, to say that one is somehow obliged to choose between the Jewish room and all the others, or to describe Judaism as a respite from modernity, as the room you come back to when the going out there's too rough, or even to seek to insinuate a Jewish identity upon the unsuspecting, to catch them before the age of consent. The way to deal with the triumph of modernity, which in this context means the availability of choice, cannot be to der

its validity. It is simply a mistake to construe Judaism as an alternative to modernity, or as an antique spiritual oasis in a relentlessly barren modern expanse. True, there are those who see it and use it as an escape, as an antidote. But there is also a Judaism that offers a road into the heart of modernity; there is a Judaism that is ours to choose, and freely, a Judaism that does not seek to circumvent our consent but that invites it. That is the Judaism we are now obliged to define.

## B. The Holocaust, Israel, and Survival

Our traditional definitions are inadequate. Here we come upon a fourth generation in search of a rationale, of an ideology, of a reason to be and to do Jewish, and to it we offer instead Judaism as an act of spite—that is, as one version or another of the notion that so long as there are antisemites in the world, it would be dishonorable to abandon the Jewish ship.

In one version, this argument is cast in historic terms. Who are the Jews? We are the people who in this, the twentieth century, were hunted and hounded and hanged and slaughtered, we are the people with tattoos burnt into our forearms. What is all this talk of purpose? We have been bound together in fire. Following Fackenheim, we insist that we will not grant Hitler a posthumous victory, which amounts to saying that so long as there are antisemites in the world, we must remain Jews. Why not intermarry? Because of Auschwitz. Why not assimilate? Because too much Jewish blood has been spilled. We may march behind the Star of David, but it is the swastika that urges us on. Our vision is not of the end of days, but of the camps; our slogan is not a blessing, but a curse: "Never again!"

But "never again," for all its moral force, is at best a way of telling Jews what to avoid; it says nothing about what we are to embrace. It induces a Judaism that comes as a reaction to antisemitism, but is wholly lacking in any substantive pro-semitism. We stay in the Jewish room, but we stay there neither to pray together nor to

play together; we stay there to sulk and to resist together. We stay there out of Jewish honor rather than Jewish conviction.

Lacking conviction, we pay the Anti-Defamation League to protect Jews and the Lubavitch movement to practice Judaism, thereby satisfying the claims of honor—but ignoring the claims of Jewish continuity, which, in an era of choice, requires conviction. Like Zionists who assert Israel's centrality but themselves choose to live at the periphery, we become Jews who assert Judaism's merits—but only for others, not for ourselves. For our underlying motive is that there be Jews, not that we ourselves be among them. And so the mere advocacy of Jewish rights becomes the sum and substance of our Jewish praxis.

And then, of course, there's Israel, precious and still beleaguered Israel, the country where had our own fathers turned right instead of left, we ourselves might now live, Israel the flowering of our redemption and still besieged. Who are the Jews? We are the people whose tiny state is still precarious, still in need of life-support, and we here are that life support. Do not speak to us of tomorrow's purpose; even as we speak, the house is burning.

But look now, the fires may be waning. Suddenly, surprisingly, peace becomes a plausible prospect. Not tomorrow, nor even the day after, but we're on the rutted, twisted, hazardous road, we're on the road. And this, in turn, enables us to acknowledge that Israel as it approaches the end of its first half-century of modern independence is no longer a state in the process of being born, and that the blossoms of redemption are not all quite so fragrant as we'd expected. Israel's presence in our lives is important, but not commanding; it is a place, after all, and not, as it has served for decades now, a faith.

Until quite recently, the contemporary equivalent of the ancient pilgrimage to the Holy Temple in Jerusalem was the "mission" to Israel, with a visit to Yad VaShem as its high point. (Or, best of all, a mission that begins in Poland and ends in Israel, a personal recapitulation of the towering events of our time.) The Holo-

caust, then Israel; "From Ashes to Rebirth."<sup>2</sup> And why not? In all of Jewish history, there are likely no more than ten dates that will be remembered so long as there are Jews left to remember things. Most generations of Jews have come and have gone without ever witnessing Jewish history except through the clouds of memory. In our time, those clouds have parted, and not merely once, but twice. And if you're too young to have witnessed the parting directly, quick, the witnesses—the survivors, the builders—are still among us, hear their stories, and know that those stories are linked, that Israel is the Phoenix risen from the literal ashes of Auschwitz.

But as it happens, one can now mourn in Washington, D.C., in the heart of what President Clinton describes as "America's public square." And now, after Cambodia and Bosnia and Rwanda and a dozen other places, the uniqueness of the Holocaust, of our own experience, is no longer self-evident, it must be explained and defended.

Now the time of mourning passes, the Holocaust recedes; now the birth trauma is over, Israel takes its proper place in the family of nations and occupies a more balanced place in our own *weltanschauung*.<sup>3</sup> Then what comes to rouse us now? Or: Having for decades stood with the help of the Holocaust and Israel, we must now learn to stand on our own, no crutches. But if a people wants to stand, it must know what it stands *for*.

<sup>2</sup> And so Spielberg's *Schindler's List* ends with a sappy rendition of "Jerusalem of Gold." A happy ending after all.

<sup>3</sup> Until quite recently, the sale of Israel Bonds was a staple feature of American Yom Kippur services. Now, the synagogue building fund and/or Mazon: A Jewish Response to Hunger are quite as likely to be the established causes deemed appropriate for the Day of Atonement; slowly, Israel's place in our consciousness shifts. But note: These developments, of which the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum is surely the more important, do not imply a reversion to that earlier time in the American Jewish experience when people such as Rabbi David Phillipson could assert—the year was 1895—that "The United States is our Palestine and Washington our Jerusalem."

Perhaps I overstate. Try this, instead: We arrive at a generation that is looking for an idea, and to it we offer instead Judaism as collective identity, laying upon the individual the responsibility for the survival of the tribe. "Whatever Judaism may or may not mean to you, you owe it to the Jewish people to hang in—to pray Jewish, to give Jewish, to marry Jewish. Only so can Judaism survive. To leave the room is to go AWOL."

Thus Judaism is transformed from an opportunity into an obligation, from an interest into a debt. The past becomes not the prologue to the future, but its justification. As if in America the survival of Jews is truly at stake, when we know, or should, that the issue here is not at all the survival of Jews, but the survival of *the Jews*—that is, the survival not of an aggregation of individuals but of a community of intention.

### C. Nostalgia

Sometimes we try a different tack, arguing not from Judaism-as-honor but from the alleged utility of "roots," offering Judaism as purposeful nostalgia. In one form or another, we assert that you cannot know where you are going unless you know where you have come from. Unfortunately, however, the remembered past is only a very superficial prologue to the intended future. Once we have remembered the past, what are we supposed to do with it? What is the connection between the world of our fathers and the world of our children, or even to our own world, for that matter?<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Some readers of this essay will have seen *Avalon*, that wholly lovely movie the comforting point of which is that, notwithstanding massive sociological change, the connecting story can be passed from generation to generation. And perhaps, seeing it, they will have been reminded of the oft-told tale about the several generations of Hassidic masters, beginning with the one who, faced with a problem, goes to a secret place in the woods and there lights a fire and utters a secret prayer, and the problem is solved, and ending with the one who no longer knows the place and no longer knows the fire and no longer knows the prayer but who still remembers the story. "And," the tale concludes, "even that was sufficient." But plainly stories of how it used to be are at most necessary; they are never sufficient.

A living Judaism cannot be content with once-upon-a-time stories. Such stories are for putting people to sleep, not for awakening them. It is not enough to seek to remember, or even in fact to succeed in the remembering; remembering is, after all, only a tiny fragment of experience. (And remembering yesterday is only a fragment of a fragment; the rest of our remembering is about our hopes, our dreams, our promises.) A generation that in search of memory is satisfied to spend its time taping the oral histories of its grandparents may be richer than a generation that turns its back on those grandparents, richer both because of what it learns from them and because the very act of taking their histories is itself enriching. But at the end of the day, which is to say, at the end of its allotted time, when *its* grandchildren come to *it* to take *its* oral history, what will it have to say that is not second-hand, what new entries of its own will it have to add to our common bank of memory? Memory is a wonderful resource, but it cannot be sustained unless it is also replenished. The story cannot be told generation after generation unless it is refreshed generation after generation—unless, that is, each new generation adds to it, lives it, writes it.

Judaism, in short, is a living culture—or it is a vestigial curiosity. Our cultural inheritance is not just a collection of Aesopian fables, not just folklore. However sweet the folklore, however evocative the nostalgia, it is not the essence.

#### D. Universalism and Particularism

Which brings me to a slightly different take on modernity and the Jews, a shift in metaphor and in emphasis. When we come, as each generation must, to write our story, there seems in North America no special reason to write it in Jewish letters. Indeed, those ancient block letters, letters most of us can no longer make out, seem now hieroglyphics left over from a musty tribal past in a world that must, we have been taught, learn to move beyond tribalism, into the Esperanto sunshine of universalism.

In short, modernity asserts that loyalties to groups smaller than the whole family of humankind are regressive; it endorses universalism and condemns particularism. But Judaism, however universalist it may be in ideology, has always been particular in structure.

In place of that particularity, modernity promises a world in which culture itself is progressively universalized—music, and science, and now commerce, too, and, increasingly, even the media. CNN and McDonald's and Citibank everywhere. And modernity promises, and on occasion delivers, a world in which every man and woman and every people can enter on the same terms and have the same opportunity as all others, independent background. And if we, children of modernity that we are, observe that the ancient ethnic and the modern national instincts are in our time resurgent, we do not conclude that modernity is wanting, but only that it has not yet conquered its anachronistic enemies.

In America, at least, you don't have to be Jewish to love Levy's real Jewish rye, come fresh from the melting oven. And if you don't have to be Jewish to love Levy's Jewish rye, there comes the obvious question: What do you have to be Jewish to be able to do? What can a Jew do or know or feel or think or be that other cannot do or know or feel or think or be? And if there's no compelling answer, then why be or stay Jewish? Isn't so being as so staying an act of rebellion against the liberating forces of modernity?

The question is real; except for those who would turn their back on modernity, the response is immensely complex. For our purposes here, I will only sketch its outlines.

It was Santayana who wrote that it is as foolish to suppose that one can be a human being in general as to suppose that one can speak language in general. Universalism and particularism are not mutually exclusive; they are complementary, and the ideal relationship between them is one of creative tension rather than head-on-head antagonism.



The fact is that the Jews are a people that live most creatively and most productively and most humanly and most Jewishly precisely at the intersection of universalism and particularism, precisely where "If I am not for myself, who will be for me?" encounters "If I am only for myself, what am I?" But the balance between the two sets of claims, sometimes coincident and sometimes competing, is inherently unstable. In every generation, there are those who would weight the scales heavily in the one direction or in the other. In this generation, the generation that has mourned the Kingdom of Night and that has marveled at the Republic of Hope, any stable balance seems at best a distant hope.

We emerge from the Kingdom of Night divided between those who believe that because the world turned its back on us, we owe the world nothing and those who believe that because the world turned its back on us, because we, above all others, know how unbearable is the insult, how lingering the injury, we cannot and must not and will not be among the back-turners.

We enter the Republic of Hope in search, at last, of balance, only to discover that there the competition between the claims of the universal and the claims of the particular is even more fierce, in part because so much more is at stake, in part because these issues play so differently in the context of a sovereign Jewish state.

A healing ideology for the Jewish people would seek to restore the creative tension between the competing claims on our conscience and on our energies, the claims of the particular and the claims of the universal, the claims of being for ourselves and of being for others—not only because that tension is a source of creativity, and not only because it is authentic, but also because it is right, it is proper, it is substantively at the heart of how we believe the world may best be repaired, each with its own god and we with ours, learning to walk together in order together to ascend the holy mountain.

## E. Consent

And that brings me to a different formulation of the problem that modernity puts before us, the most poignant formulation of all. Who, or what, in fact, is the god with whom we seek to ascend the mountain? What, in short, can we say of Jewish purpose?

A serious concern for Jewish continuity forces that question upon us; in an era of choice, we are required to articulate a rationale for continuity, to complete the sentence that begins with the words "It is important that the Jews survive—and, by extension, that I persist as a Jew—in order to \_\_\_\_." For as powerful as the claim of descent may be, it is not those claims that will win the day in North America, modernity's heart. Nor is it sufficient to define our purpose as a reaction to the threats to Jewish survival (as in, "It is important that the Jews survive in order that they survive") Our purpose must be chosen, not imposed; it must reflect consent, intention.

A Judaism of consent. But that is precisely what we fear, not only because we do not have the self-respect to imagine that such a Judaism can successfully compete in the marketplace of ideas, but also because we of the second and third generation no longer remember just what it is we supposedly consented to. We were, after all, inducted into a tradition not of consent but of descent. We have lived so long on the inertial momentum of descent that we do not know and fear to try an alternative source of energy.

We might, to be sure, find it possible to improve the quality of Jewish life through tinkering with technique, through reforming Jewish education or through training new generations of Jewish communal workers. But the problems we face, and even the issue of our survival itself, cannot adequately be addressed by such activities alone. At the heart of our educational crisis is not the inadequacy of our teachers but our continuing failure to define the aims of Jewish education; at the heart of our communal crisis is not the quality of our leadership, professional or lay, but the absence of an overarching idea that will point us beyond method and towards meaning.

No, Auschwitz is not the most important thing that ever happened to our people. It is not the fires of the crematoria but the fire of the burning bush that lights our way (or else we walk in darkness). Our primordial experience was not the day we died at Auschwitz but the day we were born at the Red Sea and went on to stand at Sinai. And it was then that our real sojourn began—not the years of wandering in the desert, but the centuries of wandering through the world preaching and now and then practicing justice.

The essence, the specific genius of the Jews, is the proposition that this world is not working the way it was meant to, that it is a broken, fractured world, and that we are implicated in its repair. We were taught and now we teach that in order to lead a fully spiritual, even a sacred life, law is needed. We were taught and now we teach that in order to live a productive life, partnership in the act of creation is required. We were taught and now we teach that the question of God is not a question of whether He is jealous or of whether He is a he or even of whether He exists, but of food and of work and of shelter, of love and fidelity and the capacity for wonder.

Therefore, Judaism is not something one goes to the synagogue to implement or practice; it is, properly understood, a way of life. We do not gather in the house of study as Jews and at the gates of the city as human beings. Judaism is not a shawl we put on and take off as occasion seems to warrant, nor does God dwell in the tabernacle. The synagogue is not a closet, nor the Jew a role we sometimes play. *Judaism is a vocation; it is not the services we attend but the services we perform that define us.*

The services we perform? But for very many Jews, Judaism is not about such things at all. Their experience of Jewishness is not an inspiration; it is an irritation. Vaguely, they may care about consent and be put off by its confusions, but their problem is less about consent than it is about competence. They are aware of the gap between being and believing, between their own Jewishness and the Judaism that dwells ominously off at a distance, judging them and declaring them inadequate. This critical discrepancy

runs through Jewish life today like a massive fault line, and it is a major disincentive to Jewish commitment. Nor is it restricted to the contrast between the facts of the "average" Jewish life and norms of the imagined tradition. In countless ways, the experience of Jewishness in America today is an experience in inadequacy, an experience, therefore, in failure. Hebrew school is remembered by most Jews as the place they failed to learn Hebrew. Even those Jews who devote time to Jewish study know that they are only dabbling at the edges, so vast is the Jewish library. For that half of the Jews that contributes to Jewish philanthropy, there is only sometimes the sense of a job well and generously done; more often, they know (or are reminded) that they might have given more, that their generosity is not commensurate with the needs, which are constant and overwhelming.

So, for example, many Jews remember—whether the memory is all accurate or not hardly matters—the Passovers of their childhood. They remember the smells and the songs, the drama of seder, the Passover meal. And they wonder why it is that their own seder seems so shriveled. They are embarrassed at its atrocity at their awkward Hebrew and their hesitant singing. They leave the table stuffed, and empty; they know they have been poor caretakers of the tradition.

The consequence is that they look out at this vast thing called Judaism, this saga of woe and of wonder, through a lens of joylessness. They know, they have been taught, they sense, that out there, on the other side of the mist, it awaits them. But they do not know how to get from their barren place to the garden. And the community does not appear to offer much help in getting us there.

People enjoy doing things they know how to do; many, many Jews do not know how to do Jewish.

So why bother? Here is an uncommonly successful generation when measured by the standards that are usually invoked to measure success in America (education, wealth, status), yet they have not experienced anything that feels like Judaic success. If that is so, then being Jewish remains an impediment to success—n

in current circumstances, to secular success, to objective success, as once it was, but to a sense of well-being, of internal satisfaction. If Judaism, as one is so often reminded, is a job few do well, why accept the assignment? Oh, if your shipmates on this eternal voyage of the beleaguered call for help, you go. Emergency gets the adrenaline pumping and, again, there's the matter of honor. But when the ship docks and there's the chance to disembark, why not?

Nor does it come as consolation to know that this generation comes by its incompetence honestly, that the term is not an example of exaggerated self-criticism but an entirely accurate description. Ours is a remarkably, stupendously, ignorant generation of Jews. We do not speak the languages of our people, barely read them; we know only a hodge-podge of history, a smattering of literature. Jewish culture? A waning residue.

A good part of what I have been saying here might have been (and most likely was) said 10 and 20 years ago (and more). The current "crisis in continuity" will seem new only to those who do not remember the "crisis in identity" of the 1960s, back when the college campus was widely described as "a disaster area for Judaism." Indeed, the pull of secular society was a problem for urbanized Jews in East and Central Europe a hundred years ago—and so, too, was Judaic illiteracy. What's new?

What's new, plainly, is the terror induced by the National Jewish Population Study and its report that our rate of intermarriage has now reached some 50 percent. This is taken as grim news in two respects: First, it implies a dangerous depletion in Jewish numbers, the shrinking of a community to the point where it will no longer be able to sustain the institutions on which, it is supposed, its future depends. Second, and more compelling still, it is taken as evidence of our failure to make an adequately persuasive case for Judaism.

But before we accept the second of those propositions as dispositive, there's this to note: The rise in the rate of intermarriage, so far as we can tell from survey research, reflects not only a growing acceptance of intermarriage on the part of the Jews. It

reflects, as well, a growing acceptance on the part of the Christian community. "Would you want your daughter to marry one?" is a question not only Jews can ask or have asked. And it does not take a dramatic rise in the *percentage* of Christians who are indifferent to that question to generate very large *numbers* of Christians who are not opposed to intermarriage.

We have sought a more tolerant and open and accepting society and our search has been rewarded. We have denied that we have horns, and we are now widely viewed as hornless. So they marry us. The door is open for both going and coming. While few would argue that this open door is "good for the Jews," it is worth noting that the current and much-lamented high rate of intermarriage represents, at least in one respect, Jewish success.

Nor are we reduced to deriving comfort from such mixed successes. The fact is that our condition is not quite so bleak as is widely supposed. Indeed there are pockets of vigor and enthusiasm: a proliferation of Jewish studies programs; legions of "young leaders;" immense conventions that attract people from distant places and that overflow with energy; lawyers in Los Angeles and in Boston and in a dozen other cities who come to their offices hour early to study Talmud; new organizations, across the country, of Jewish law students and of Jewish medical students; countless Bible study groups and havurot; (relatively) new philanthropies such as the New Israel Fund, American Jewish World Service, Mazon, and the Jewish Fund for Justice; new networks of family philanthropies; an outpouring of Jewish films and of Jewish craftspeople; a flood of Jewish books; a growing comfort with the uses of Jewish political power.

All this does not undermine the diagnosis of danger. It does, however, suggest that we have, at the very least, a foundation on which to build, that whatever the disabilities we face, there is enough Jewish motive left to work with.

## II. RELIGION?

Is not religious conviction a sufficient definition of Jewish purpose? After all, if Judaism is a vocation, it is not a vocation in the modern sense of the word, vocation as occupation; it is a vocation according to its classic meaning, "an inclination, as if in response to a summons, to undertake a certain kind of work, especially a religious career."

But to say that Judaism is a religious vocation hardly settles the matter, for then we are required to ask what we mean, here in America, by "religion," how America's Jews understand Judaism-as-religion. There is no such thing as "religion-in-general." Then what is this specific religion, still more specifically the American version of this religion, about?

### A. Conscience vs. Commandment

There is no authoritative Jewish statement to which we may turn for an answer, not because we are not about such things as, for example, *tikkun olam*—the mending of our fractured world—but because we are assuredly not about authoritative statements. The well-known fact is that we lack the structure to promulgate such statements. Our community rests on conscience, not command.

But to let the explanation for our apparent silence—more precisely, for the plethora of Jewish voices—rest wholly on the structure of Jewish communal life is to say both too little and too much.

Too little: From a sociological or an organizational perspective, it is surely the case that the critical structural phenomenon that characterizes Jewish life is that ours is an entirely non-hierarchical community; no one can credibly claim to speak for the Jews. But from a theological perspective, nothing could be farther from the truth. Theologically, ours is surely the quintessential hierarchical tradition, and organizationally by far the most straightforward:

There are the people, and there is God; you can't get more hierarchical than that. There is God, and there is God's law. When the prophets called the people to justice, they were calling the people to obedience rather than to conscience. Indeed, in modern times, there was no word in the Hebrew language for "conscience." For that matter, the word for "law" in its classic sense is *halachah*, which translates as "way of life," and accurately captures the ancient understanding that everything that is required of us has been commanded us by God. So, for example, Judaism has no "preferential option for the poor;" we have, instead, commandments that govern, in minute detail, our response to poverty.

And too much: Those Jews for whom the commandments are still the unbent and unbroken truth are today relatively few in number. The second thing to understand about the Jews is that for the vast majority of us, the advent of the Enlightenment two hundred years ago radically transformed our relationship to the Commander of those commandments, hence transformed also our relationship to the laws and commandments themselves. The word *mitzvah*, originally understood as commandment, has not come to be understood in a very different way; *mitzvah* these days, to the vast majority of Jews to whom it means anything at all, means a "good deed." Moses is thereby transformed into a kind of Baden-Powell, the stiff-necked People of the Book become good scouts.

More: In America (in sharp distinction from Israel), religion is a private affair. In full keeping with the American emphasis on individualism, people are seen as entitled to hold whatever beliefs they choose, so long, of course, as they believe, however vague in God. (I speak here not of the law's entitlements, which, of course, embrace disbelief and non-belief as well, but of the culture, which tilts heavily towards belief.) A generation or two back, most Jews would likely have replied "agnostic" had they been queried regarding their theological conviction. Today, there is less reluctance to profess belief—not because belief is more solidly rooted, but because people have come to understand that

virtually any belief is acceptable. From the anthropomorphized God of yesteryear we have come to the wholly disembodied, wind in the willows God of today. God the Ineffable,<sup>5</sup> God the Prime Mover, God the Source, God (à la native Americans) the Great Spirit, God the Force for Good, a variety of Gods that seem to share only two things—the importance to people of a hand-hold on a deity, and their reluctance to accept any classic consensual version of the Jewish understanding of God.

Once God is rendered a private affair, and a murky, often childish definition of God is deemed sufficient, Judaism-as-religion becomes available in new ways. Why, indeed, bother to fight for an alternative to something as mushy and as relaxed as a Judaism that makes no important ideological claims?<sup>6</sup>

All this, as I have said, represents a radical break from the classical view, which never intended Judaism as an appeal to the individual conscience. Judaism was conceived and promulgated as a system for collective behavior. Yet for two centuries now, that system has been fighting a losing battle with the claims of individual citizenship and with western culture's celebration of individual autonomy.

## B. Doctrine vs. Culture

No great surprise in that: Heinrich Heine is alleged to be the first to have said, "*Wie es Christelt es sich, so Yudet es sich*"—as it is

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<sup>5</sup> The dictionary definition of "ineffable," a widely accepted characterization of God: "Incapable of being expressed, indescribable or unutterable."

<sup>6</sup> An example, perhaps, of generational shift: Twenty or more years ago, I wrote that "Even an atheist Jew knows quite precisely what the God in whom he does not believe expects of him." When I would speak that line to an audience, there'd be an appreciative chuckle. My recent experience with younger audiences suggests that the point may now be obsolete. I cannot say whether it has been rendered obsolete because the idea of an atheist Jew is no longer so readily available or because the notion that God expects things of people comes now as a puzzlement.

with the Christians, so it is with the Jews. Which is to say that wherever we live within a dominant Christian culture, we take on the characteristics of that culture.

So here. American Judaism is profoundly affected by this nation's radical individualism, its pronounced emphasis on rights as distinguished from obligations. (And, one might add, on identity as distinguished from ideology.) It is shaped as well—one might say distorted—by its immersion in a culture of confessional faith wherein religion is seen as fundamentally doctrinal. The idea of Judaism as "an evolving religious civilization" (Mordecai M. Kaplan's definition) necessarily recedes, for a civilization implies life in all its parts, and not merely a discrete set of beliefs.

A doctrinal Judaism may be sustainable, but it is not what most of us have or have had in mind. Judaism—the word itself is a late 19th century Protestant invention—is not a confessional faith. That is not to say that there are not Jews who so regard it. But the list of the articles of faith, however basic, has yet been agreed to. Judaism is, or is meant to be, a way of understanding and a way of living, a lived experience.

Yet as the experience of neighborhood and extended family fades and as Jewish learning and even Jewish literacy become uncommon attributes, the temptation to define the Jews as a faith community grows.<sup>7</sup> The rich and fractious arguments of contemporary Jewish life are largely doctrinal (e.g., "Who is a Jew?" patrilineal descent). Young people who feel themselves uncertain about God feel—so I learn in my conversations with college students around the country—ineligible to participate in Jewish

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<sup>7</sup> If there is any religious consensus among contemporary Jews, it is only that "If there is one, there is only One, not three." And that is hardly a comprehensive theology.

<sup>8</sup> The temptation is, of course, abetted by the American readiness to understand and accept Judaism as fundamentally analogous to Protestantism and Catholicism, as also by the Jewish readiness (even eagerness) to tuck Judaism under the protective umbrella of the First Amendment. And why not? Judaism *is* a religion, after all. But is that all it is?

life. A growing proportion of the community consists of converts to Judaism, and conversion is, formally, essentially doctrinal.

Doctrine and its corollary, ritual, which becomes the measure of Jewish identity: The typical survey research into patterns of Jewish identity focuses heavily on levels of ritual observance (among which, incidentally, visiting Israel is now included). Some number, even a substantial number, of Jews may find great satisfaction in ritual; some may even be consumed by it. But large numbers do and will see ritual as pointless, at least if it is not closely associated with substance. More important, if ritual is the only direct Jewish experience available to people, their Jewish experience is constricted in the extreme.

### C. Spirituality

As if to take account of such considerations, there is these days a growing interest in Judaism as a spiritual experience. From alternative and more intimate *minyanim* to the reclaiming of forgotten rituals to decisively new-age retreats, the Jewish landscape is dotted with a variety of efforts that seek to respond to the yearning for a Judaism that offers meaning beyond doctrine, beyond ritual, that offers the prospect of spiritual sustenance.

It is difficult to assess the importance of the new spirituality to the collectivity (as distinguished from its evident importance to those who pursue it). Indeed, it is even difficult to gauge its novelty. One assumes that in every generation, there have been those who have found institutional life too impersonal, too encrusted, who have sought a religious experience that would speak more directly to their own needs.<sup>9</sup> Whether or not that be so, this generation's search has its own distinctive characteristics. The spiritual quest comes, in some measure, not only as a rebellion against the inherent impersonality of established institutional

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<sup>9</sup> And one assumes, further, that where their efforts have succeeded, they have in their turn eventually become encrusted, occasioning new rebellions.

forms, but also as a way of filling the void left by the death of Jewish secularism.<sup>10</sup> And it happens at a time when, by and large, the disposition of the organized community is more to coopt than to denounce. In consequence, the movement towards the spiritual happens less in opposition to the established institutional life of the community than alongside it, and there are significant number of people who comfortably engage in both.

There is, however, a discernible fault line, there where style becomes substance, that might become a genuine divide. The spiritual quest often plays out as a highly personalized pursuit, whereas Judaism traditionally, as I have indicated, has focused less on the needs and ambitions of the individual than on the needs and the aspirations of the collectivity. That may "feel" like a matter of style, but, given Judaism's traditional perspectives, it has important substantive implications. In effect, if not explicitly, the proponents of spirituality assert that it is precisely Judaism's traditional bias towards the collectivity that they have come to redress—and some of them, convinced that traditional institutions are closed to their needs as individuals, propose to do their work outside the community. In their view, the implied question to which the spiritual quest is presumably the answer is, "What can God—however understood—do for me? Where can I find peace, solace, connectedness to nature and to the implicit order of things?" And in their view, Judaism's explicit question, by way of contrast, is, "What can I do for God? How can I enhance this world, the work of God's hands, and bring comfort to His children?"

A serious religious tradition must seek to encourage the search for answers to both kinds of questions, to questions that go to the meaning of life as well as to the meaning of *my* life. Yes, there is :

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<sup>10</sup> I say *secularism* rather than *secularity* intending not merely the relative absence of a religious orientation but the explicit rejection of religion and its replacement by a considered Jewish alternative focused on history and culture. There are today many non-religious, or secular, Jews; there are very few secularist Jews. By now, moreover, religion having become considerably more casual and personal, people who might once have thought of themselves as secular may easily, if they are so inclined, regard themselves as religious.

fault line between the spiritual and the institutional, but yes, too, a dialogue between the two promises enrichment for both: A thriving American Judaism must acknowledge and address the validity of the critique that the Jewish community, as it is, is too often insensitive to the needs of the individuals who comprise it, just as a serious quest for spirituality within a Jewish context must acknowledge not only the claims of the community, but the degree to which Judaism's special insight points towards the personal benefits of communal involvement.

All that said, the quest for meaning is manifestly a way into Judaism for some number of people. Its likely benefits to the larger community aside, as also its relationship to the Jewish tradition, it is an authentic expression of need and of intention. From its proponents we learn, yet again, that the heart has both its reasons and its wisdom: The word "religion" cannot refer only to formal religious praxis; there are, it turns out, many, many, more Jews who are religious than so narrow a definition permits. And the readiness of these people to engage in an effort to locate meaning and purpose amidst the destabilizing chaos of our time suggests that Judaism may be accessible to them, and they to it, in ways that would have seemed unlikely a generation ago.

Nor is there any reason to believe that the sometime tension between current modes of spiritual expression and more conventional Jewish practice is destructive. Who can persuasively argue that the rigorous and often off-putting formalism of the conventional will not benefit from the softening inherent in the spiritual? The evidence that "religion" is susceptible of broader definition than systematic theology permits is, after all, considerable, and the evidence from history that Judaism has been enriched and enlivened by stretching its self-definitions is not less considerable. Plainly, no one mode of response to the questions that prompt people to turn towards religion will suit all. Shall the effort of those who find meaning in the spiritual mode and who seek somehow to integrate that mode with the Jewish calendar and with the Jewish community be spurned? Or shall we seek to

see how far and with what profit the boundaries of Judaism may plausibly be stretched?

Perhaps what all this means is that we are moving beyond the debate between the religious and the secular camps that marked the first half or so of this century. Perhaps, at last, we are coming to understand that the religious quest, however it unfolds, is not about conformity to any of the classic compartments, that we are not required to view Jewish religious practice as hierarchically ordered. The broadened boundaries enable us to assert that the most observant are not necessarily the most "authentic," that when we move towards a heightened religious sensibility we do not necessarily move towards Orthodox definitions of that sensibility. "More" may be better and "most" may be best, but it is not the case that at the pinnacle of our religious pyramid sit the ultra-Orthodox, followed by the conventionally Orthodox, followed by Conservative Jews, then Reform Jews, then Reconstructionist Jews, finally secular Jews. Perhaps, indeed, there is no pyramid.

### III. SOCIAL ACTION, JUDAISM, AND JEWISH CONTINUITY

No pyramid, no hierarchy, only different roads, some more informed by the tradition, some less. Different roads, but one marker common to all: Mending the world, somehow.

For nothing so powerfully marks the American Jewish community as its endorsement of *tikkun olam* as a key (*the key?*) ingredient in our people's religious understanding. Indeed, so enthusiastic is that endorsement that it is at the very heart of the distinctive religion we may call "American Judaism."<sup>11</sup> Especially in the period since the end of mass Jewish immigration (roughly, 1924), the years in which an American Judaism was consolidated, the devotion of the community to social action has emerged as a dominant aspect of popular Jewish theology. That devotion is reflected in the organizational history of the community, in myriad personal biographies, and, repeatedly over the decades, in research on Jewish attitudes and opinions.

#### A. Social Action: A Passing Phase?

Often, these days, we are told that the commitment to social action is waning. Two "explanations" for the decline are typically proposed. The first is that we have become too comfortable, that the sweet smell of our success acts as a kind of chloroform to our righteous indignation. And the second is an apparent swing in the direction of particularism, towards interests and away from

<sup>11</sup> The relationship of the Orthodox community to *tikkun olam*, as to an array of the issues I here discuss (as, for example, to the balance between particularism and universalism), is by and large quite different (with notable exceptions). Throughout, therefore, and with regret, my generalizations are meant to apply to the 85-90% of the community that is not Orthodox.

values, towards stability and away from justice. Those Jews who have taken justice as their mission have been, in general—I need to emphasize that there are many exceptions, but the general rule holds—those whose ties to the Jewish community have been most attenuated. And the organized community, for its part (and perhaps inevitably), has been preoccupied (and sometimes obsessed) with narrower issues, preeminent among them the issue of Jewish survival—the term that has now been taken over by "continuity."

This should come as no surprise. The specific torment that is the legacy of this bloody century is profoundly disabling. And now it is expanded by the sense that it is not only we, but all America (to say nothing of other parts of the world) that are threatened with crippling disorder. One may well argue—I would and do—that in the current American climate, more and more Jews are tempted to tilt away from the prophetic and towards the rabbinic, away from justice and towards order. Our values, in other words, have been displaced by our interests.

Perhaps, then, the commitment to social action was merely a phase in the unfolding saga of American Jewry. Perhaps, just as the American Jewish community in a somewhat desperate search for a rationale for its persistence latched onto Israel and the Holocaust as its defining symbols, latched on to them with religious fervor, so, too, it attached itself to social action and, thereby, to the liberalism which is social action's principal political expression.

Liberalism, then, as the third leg of the stool that for a time seemed to replace religion as the seat of Judaism. And if so, then perhaps that third leg is no sturdier than the first two?

No. Our historic commitment to social action was not merely a fad, an ephemeral infatuation. It was, and remains, an authentic contemporary expression of an ancient understanding.

In fact, the evidence of a "diminished commitment" is by no means clear. True, Jews have moved rightward, along with the



rest of the country.<sup>12</sup> Specifically, there has long been a 20 percent differential between Jews who identify themselves as liberals as compared to non-Jewish Americans who so identify themselves, and, as the legions of liberals have diminished, so have the legions of Jewish liberals. But surely the more surprising statistics are that the 20 percent differential remains, and, more than that, that the conventional association between rising income and rising conservatism does not hold for the Jews.<sup>13</sup>

Voting data and campaign contribution data continue to support the observation that Jews in fact remain remarkably liberal in their political views. Jewish liberalism apparently withstood the attacks (as well as the confident predictions) of the neo-conservatives of the 1980s, and it continues, by and large, to withstand the painful abrasions in Black-Jewish relations.

## B. Wanted: A Theory of Social Action

Still, whatever the current state of our commitment to social action, the foundation for that commitment is vague, ill-understood. Here, then, one way of understanding it:

We are the tribe that discovered the universal god, but chose to remain a tribe, to remain a people apart.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>12</sup> I am aware, of course, that some people maintain that a move rightward does not necessarily mean a diminished commitment to social action. According to that view, liberalism no longer represents the most obvious political expression of such a commitment. A full discussion of the connection lies well beyond my scope here. Suffice it to say that survey research establishes a continuing correlation between devotion to social action and political liberalism.

<sup>13</sup> In the Congressional elections of 1994, 78 percent of Jewish voters cast their ballots for the Democratic candidate for the House in their district. The consequent spread between Jews and all other voters was 28 percent.

<sup>14</sup> By and large, our neighbors have failed to understand the urgency we have attached and continue to attach to the tribal boundaries. No small part of our historic quarrel with the Church has issued from that lack of understanding. It is as if the Church had said to us, "Now that you have discovered the universal God, why not become God's universal people?" only to have us respond, "Thanks for the invitation; you can have our God, but you can't have us."

It is difficult in the extreme to figure out how to be, or to want to be, simultaneously, apart from and a part of the larger society. The intersection where we have sought and seek to stand is not a steady place with a sure footing. We acknowledge that if we are not for ourselves, no one will be for us, and that if we are only for ourselves, we are nothing, but the working out of those twin perceptions in the real world, as I earlier observed, is no easy matter.

Although neither of Hillel's famous questions can stand by itself, there was, in rough historical terms, a division of labor in responding to them. The priests, and then the rabbis, were principally concerned with the first question—If I am not for myself, who will be for me?—hence with the work of self-preservation, with Jewish interests, with social stability, with the binding up of Jewish wounds, with Jewish particularism. The prophets took the second question—If I am only for myself, what am I?—as the more urgent: Their concern was with Jewish universalism, with Jewish values, with social justice. The rabbis taught that there can be no justice without stability, and they were right; the prophets taught that there can be no stability without justice, and they, too, were right. One can usefully study Jewish history as the story of the tensions between the two rights, the tension and the competition.

Pendulum-like, we have swung now in this direction, now in that; the mid-point where we are meant to live our lives has been a hard place to stand, to keep our balance; the pendulum is not easily calibrated. But in America, and especially in the last 75 years or so, the prophetic tradition has clearly been dominant.

Because that is so, it is at least potentially a valuable element in the definition of Jewish purpose that lies at the heart of the crisis in continuity.

But that commitment is, in fact, endangered by two related problems. First, the Jewish community's attention appears these days to be distracted by other commitments and other issues—notably, of course, the "continuity" problem. Often, the focus on continuity—perceived as the preeminent Jewish

interest—is seen as competitive with a focus on social action in particular, Jewish values in general. Second, the theoretical rationale for the commitment to social action is inadequate. Those of us who seek to advance the case for social action regularly encounter what I have come to call ‘the Ethical Culture’ response: “If all that Judaism requires of me is that I be a ‘good person,’ why bother with Judaism? Why not Ethical Culture, or simply my own conscience? I can be a good person without all the burdens and the trappings that Judaism involves.” To that complaint, in whatever its specific formulation, there is no answer that is both pithy and persuasive.

I have said that the two problems are related. It is not merely that a stronger theoretical foundation for the commitment to social action would encourage us to withstand the occasional distractions, though that is so. More than that, I mean to argue that the problem of Jewish continuity, our leading current “distraction,” would in fact be considerably less urgent were we better able to articulate a theory of Jewish social action. Such a theory, as I here seek to show, and the practice that logically follows from it, would be a major contribution to “solving” the continuity problem.<sup>15</sup>

By and large, the case for an *intrinsic* connection between Judaism and social action has become murky. So far as major Jewish membership organizations are concerned, with the exception of the Reform movement—an important exception, to be sure—a commitment to social action has seemed more an accident of organizational history than an organic product of the organization’s Jewishness. And with respect to individual Jewish social activists, the relationship is most often reduced to one of vague Jewish values pointing towards involvement in non-

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<sup>15</sup> In truth, social action requires no justification beyond itself. It is intrinsically worthy, adding honor to the lives of those who engage in it and bringing comfort and dignity to those who are its objects. Here, however, my focus is on social action not as an end but as a means. This way of thinking about social action may be thought somewhat of a vulgarization. The pursuit of justice is an absolute value, valid not because it has this or that associated benefit. Is it not unseemly to view it instrumentally? But to say that a thing is valuable in and of itself does not require that we be blind to its associated merits.

sectarian social action. So viewed, the persistent liberalism of America’s Jews is not a necessary aspect of their Judaism but merely a coincidental correlate of it. The common perception is that just as one does not have to be Jewish to love Levy’s real Jewish rye, one does not have to be Jewish to march for better housing or a more progressive tax system.

And, indeed, one does not—for which let us praise the Lord, since if it were the case that the world’s fractures were condemned to waiting on the Jews and the Jews alone for their repair, we’d be even worse trouble than we are. The question is not whether one “must” be a Jew in order to engage in *tikkun olam*. Of course one need not be, and it is absurd to suggest in any way that one does. But then how do we make the case?

Two assertions: Being Jewish is, at least potentially, an effective stimulus to a life devoted to social action; social action is an important vehicle for Jewish continuity.

In an ideal world, a significant number of Jews—never all, since there are many mansions in our Father’s house—would live out the organic connection between their Jewishness and their social conscience. Connection? That is too weak a word. Judaism does not permit indifference to justice. Instead, it insists on concern for justice. It is not “connected” to the pursuit of justice; it incorporates that pursuit.

That is, at least, one fair reading of the tradition. But it is a reading that will have no appeal whatever to those who are indifferent to Jewish destiny. We cannot make the case for Jewish social action by “proving” that our ancient texts or our European progenitors endorsed liberal perspectives. The missing link is no another footnote, another arcane reference.

The next sentence, rhetorically, should begin with “The missing link is \_\_\_\_\_.” But there is no one missing link. Those of us who engage with the question of Jews and social action out of a concern for both must learn to speak to multiple Jewish constituencies, to each in the language appropriate to each: To the Jewish

social activists who are not in search of more intimate Jewish connections, as also to the Jews deeply committed to Jewish continuity who see no compelling reason to become engaged in social action, as also to Jews, young Jews in the main, who are indifferent to both.

### C. Jewish Values, Jewish Interests

I begin with what we may call "Jewish Jews," those whose principal concern is with Jewish continuity, and whose orientation towards social action may or may not be positive and who, even if their orientation is positive, may or may not see social action as organically intertwined with Judaism.

To such people, it seems to me, there are two fundamental arguments that need to be put forward:

First, however discomfiting the assertion may be, Judaism is inherently a political religion. There are those who prefer to see Judaism as a place to escape the hurly-burly world of politics, as a place for quiet communion with God. But the thundering mandate to pursue justice allows no such flight; Shabbat was meant as a resting place, not as a stopping place. One rests in order to regather one's energies, then to take up the daily battle once again.

And the battle for justice leads inevitably to the halls of government, for justice in a self-governing community is by definition the act of the collectivity and of its agent, the government.

Second, Jews depend on domestic tranquility, and domestic tranquility in turn implies concern for social equity, for a society of opportunity, for a pluralistic society that makes room both for individual mobility and for group solidarity.

That argument will surely beget (among others) the following response: Our task, insofar as the world of politics is concerned, is to defend Jewish interests. Our constant measure must be whether "it" is good for the Jews. Fair enough. Any group is

entitled to look out for its own interests. But with respect to the underlying American Jewish interest, surely we can reply that Church-state separation, the protection of civil rights and civil liberties, and a continuing concern for the left-behind and the left-out and the locked-out are all part of the Jewish interest—and are all more likely to be pursued by the left than by the right.

Beyond the specific issues of public policy, where reasonable people will always differ, there is also and again this, the recurrent and fundamental point of this paper: If our concern is with the defense of the Jewish interest, *the Jews have no more urgent interest than the energetic pursuit of their values*. It is wrong, verging on wicked, to suggest that our values and our interests compete in a zero-sum game.

That is an absolutely critical perception. It follows directly from the analytic observations in the first part of this essay. It is the answer to the question of what we stand *for*. Either we become (again?) a people engaged in mending the world, our most comprehensive and compelling value, or we are redundantly a people engaged in its own survival in order to survive. And surely we do not intend that the invitation we extend to the next generation of Jews read, "Please come survive with us." To such an invitation, relatively few may be expected to RSVP.

### D. Community as the Agent of Values

But to say that we have no more urgent interest than the energetic pursuit of our values, which sounds reasonable enough, is to imply a revolution in the structure and orientation of the organized Jewish community.

The reason is simple: The effective pursuit of values is not principally a concern of the pulpit or the classroom. It is not the rhetorical commitment to values but their experiential representation that makes the difference. Fealty to values is not a matter of words but of works. Or: We may be the first to arrive at every

rally, we may shout from every rooftop. Eventually, save as the internal processes of our community are seen as worthy, all our stern talk of justice will be seen as empty. Our eloquent endorsements may attract new interest on the part of young Jews, but once they act on that interest, becoming involved in the community, and learn there that what we say is very different from what we do, they will understand that our eloquence is in fact just noise.

There are myriad examples. There seems very little relationship between the *mentschlichkeit* preached by Jewish organizations and the internal practices of those organizations. At our fund-raising dinners, we persist in honoring people we know to be dishonorable—or, at the least, not worthy of note save for their utility in attracting donors. Structurally, our community is led by its most affluent members, who often have very little knowledge or appreciation of the needs, desires, or perspectives of its masses. Indeed, the very term “leadership,” so often employed in Jewish life, is rendered meaningless by the virtual absence of a followership. Generally, the costs of active participation in Jewish leadership are far too high for the average Jew. More: Even the costs of active participation in Jewish life in a non-leadership capacity—synagogue membership (including the capital campaign), philanthropic contribution, Jewish summer camp for the children, day school tuition—place truly active participation beyond the easy reach of very many Jews.

And what is it we offer that is worth the costs? We offer, we say, community. But the community we offer is a community of membership, not of belonging. We offer events rather than encounters, affiliation rather than support. In an age of epidemic loneliness, we remain, for very many Jews, a house rather than a genuine home.

And so forth. I do not intend this to be a comprehensive catalogue of Jewish failures. I mean instead to call attention to the fact that the organized Jewish community is quite often seen by the masses of American Jews as an alien and alienating place, as a closed and somewhat puzzling playground for a self-appointed

elite. And, even when it is not seen in so critical a light, it seems to many of its members largely irrelevant to their needs.

There is an exception: When the organized community deals with one or another of the persistent emergencies of Jewish life, such as Israel's safety, the needs of Soviet or other endangered Jewries, antisemitism here at home, its legitimacy is accepted. For specific and urgent purposes, the parts of the community become a whole. The organized community as a volunteer fire-department, as it were.

But the rest of the time, the organized community—and, by extension, Jewish life itself seems to be seen as a bore.

### E. For Those Who Stand Outside

These last several pages were introduced as a discussion of “Jewish Jews,” which is to say of people who have some sense of Jewish identity. They may be purposefully Jewish or merely inertially Jewish, but, whatever their reasons and rationales, they count themselves as Jews and, perhaps more important, it matters to them that their children be raised as Jews.

But there remains another large category of truly peripheral Jews, people who may or may not deny their Jewishness but to whom it is a matter of relative indifference. Some of these are among the apparently large number of Jews who are deeply engaged in social action but whose ties to the Jewish community are, at best, tenuous.

Among these, the obstacles and disincentives to Jewish activity are massive: Their ideology reinforces their indifference, swells it into antipathy. Their prevailing ideology is often explicitly secular, opposed to ethnic and religious identification. (Except, as the *zeitgeist* indicates, to ethnic identification by people of color.) They consequently perceive Jewish continuity as a parochial concern, one to which they are at best indifferent, at worst hostile.

The community lacks a strategy to reach such people. When opportunity arises, we try to bring them closer either through rational persuasion or through guilt. But what is it that we offer them?

Insofar as the answer is "community," the answer is not compelling. If you're out there looking for a touch of *gemeinschaft* to make the lonely crowd a tad less lonely, why look to this cumbersome, massive, all-encompassing thing called "the Jewish people," this people that seeks to claim all of you, when there's a 12-step group just around the corner, or a continuing forum on CompuServe, that offers you a community of comfortably limited liability? Or perhaps you already have a community of passionately shared interest or conviction—feminists, civil libertarians, neighbors, whatever. What added benefit would the Jewish community, loose and chaotic (and expensive) as it is, bring you?

We cannot cite texts to these people, nor can we cite Israel, nor can we cite examples of Jewish social action heroes. For every name of a Jewish Jew who is prominently a social activist, they can counter with ten names of inertially Jewish social activists, proving that there is no necessary association between Jewishness and social activism.

How can we possibly persuade them of the inadequacy of their ways? Shall we ask for their pity? Shall we remind them of their obligations?

No, save for a random "conversion" here or there, most often based on personal association and coincidence rather than on making a persuasive case, the only way to attract such people to the Jewish fold is to work within the fold to make of it more manifestly a breeding ground for social activism. Each time a Jewish organization visibly and effectively enters the battle for social justice, each time the Jewish community in its majority is seen as an important participant in that battle, each time, therefore, that the Jews are seen as a people of passionate and persistent devotion to the cause of social justice, the case for involvement with the organization, with the community, with the Jews, is

strengthened. The strengthening is, of course, merely implicit. For those who want active proselytization, that is inherently frustrating. But a genuinely activist community is, in any case, the best evidence the proselytizer can bring.

In short: If our aim is to encourage Jews who are devoted to social activism to participate more fully in the organized Jewish community, it is not the image of the community but its reality that must be addressed.

And so, also, for that larger number of young people who are engaged neither by Judaism nor by social activism, a constituency I have here not directly addressed. We are coming to know a fair amount about the instinct for altruism, for voluntarism, for public service, and much of what we know is encouraging. Give a worthy cause and a plausible structure to engage with it, many young people—including, specifically, many of our best and our brightest—are eager to become involved. There is ample reason to suppose that were our community to offer important opportunities for such service, we would come to be perceived quite differently by a generation of youngsters who cannot now make out what it is we are truly about.<sup>16</sup>

Which means that, institutionally, the prescription is the same: the Jewish Jews, the non-Jewish Jews, and the young whose attitudes towards Judaism are still in formation: Look to the ways of the community. It is the ways we are rather than the things we claim that will make the strongest case.

Consider, for example, what it might mean were we able to make our case based on the revival of the ancient and honorable tradition of the Jews as idol-smashers:

The story begins cautiously, a midrash on the text: It came one day to young Abraham, still Abram then, not yet a Jew, as he was caring for the merchandise in his father's idol shop, that these

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<sup>16</sup> Attendance at the proliferating "Return to Passion" conferences in Jewish communities around the country offers at least some evidence of that eagerness.

objects were a delusion: "Eyes have they, but they see not; ears have they, but they hear not." And so he smashed them, and some centuries later, in the very first of the Ten Commandments, we are instructed not to worship idols.

But to refrain from worshipping idols is not yet to engage in their smashing. We came to that—the Abrahamic tradition rather than the Mosaic, as it were—later. We came to it in the form of skepticism, in the form of rebellion and revolution, in the form of innovation and factionalism, most powerfully in the form of a critical stance towards the present and an insistent commitment to a future more kind, more gentle, and more just.

The Jew as critic, the Jew as idealist. And now, invited to power, the Jew as a builder of the bridging connection between criticism and creation. The opportunity now, at long and painful last, is to go beyond dissent, beyond smashing the idols; it is also to mend the world so that it works as we've been taught it was meant to. In the one hand, Abram's hammer, in the other, Jacob's ladder. Criticism all by itself is acceptable only from the powerless, among whose number we are no longer counted. (Not, at any rate, by others.) So, also, idealism. One or the other, without painstaking attention to the gritty detail of construction, leads not to the plowshare but to the guillotine. Empowered, unless we stay the course, unless we follow up on the shouting from the rooftops and the ringing of the bell, unless we come to the task with the tools of mending, our criticism and even our idealism are transformed into farce—farce, and then tragedy.

Does such a midrash, along with the effort to breathe life into it, not comprise an invitation to Jewish life?

#### IV. WHAT, THEN, TO DO?

In 1898, Ahad Ha'Am wrote that,

*The profound tragedy of our spiritual life in the present day is perhaps only a result of our failure to justify in practice the potentialities of our election. On the one hand, there still lives within us, though it be only in the form of an instinctive feeling, a belief in that moral fitness for which we were chosen from all the nations, and in that national mission which consists in living the highest type of moral life. But, on the other hand, since the day when we left the ghetto, and started to partake of the world's life and its civilization, we cannot help seeing that our superiority is potential merely.*

What to do? Why, to seek to transform the potential into the actual. And if we are, as well we should be, inhibited about the word "superiority," change it to the word "ambition." Create a Jewish community so ethically ambitious that no one would think to abandon it, that even the hitherto indifferent will be caught up in its work.

I refrain from offering here a list of possible projects and programs that would translate ambition into action. Such a list could readily be compiled, based both on existing efforts and on the pent-up hopes, plans, and fantasies of all those already engaged, in one form or another, in the work of Jewish renewal.

But there's the rub: The very fact that there is much already going on that fits well the challenge we face, that often grows out of a similar analytic framework, and that the community nonetheless seems stuck, unable to coalesce around any enticing theme, and that programs that fall under the heading of *tikkun olam* (I include under the heading *tikkun* both social action and work within the community in the arena of nurturing and ethical behavior—external and internal *tikkun*, as it were) are in the main sporadic and isolated rather than systematic and mutually rein-

forcing, is a powerful indication that something other than zippy ideas is missing.<sup>17</sup>

What's missing is an articulated agenda that responds to the challenges herein described. But we lack today the capacity to generate such an agenda. Absent the capacity, we will continue, virtuously, to nibble at the problem. And others will continue to overlook our effort.

There are two aspects to such an ambition, neither alone sufficient, each equally necessary and equally deserving of attention, each quite intimately related to the other. The first of these is the work of community-building. The second is the work of *tikkun olam*.

I offer no agenda here, only some ingredients. The development of an agenda must be a shared process, lest issues of turf and ownership cripple its consideration from the outset. Nor can we assume that an agenda prepared today will be appropriate tomorrow; the task of agenda-building is ongoing. And it is a task with which no one is now charged.

Accordingly, the immediate task is to develop a definition of American Jewish possibilities and purposes that goes beyond such catchwords as "survival" and "continuity," that captures the attention and the imagination and the ambition of a significant

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<sup>17</sup> Still, it bears noting that even as we work through the larger agenda and test its possibilities, we need to strengthen those agents and agencies within the community that already take the work of mending as their explicit concern. Whether they be large, established organizations (e.g., the Union of American Hebrew Congregations) or relatively new and relatively modest organizations (e.g., the Jewish Fund for Justice, Mazon), they are the vanguard of the community with regard to *tikkun olam*.

But these are, however attractive, only our collective holding action. They have not defeated the threats to Jewish continuity until now, nor are they likely to tomorrow. And, more important: Social action, as here conceived, is not simply "another project" of our community, an appendage to everything else we do. It is our purpose. Hence it cannot properly be divorced from who and what we are in all respects.

number of people, to ground our programmatic proposals in a vision of American Jewish possibilities, purposes, and priorities that is now lacking. And we need to derive and disseminate from that definition, that vision, programmatic proposals that are both enticing and feasible.

## A. Community

Community—specifically, a nurturing community, a community that is not satisfied to call itself the House of Israel but that insists on becoming a *home* for Israel as well. Such a community would offer its members comfort, and it would offer them honesty, too. It would reject hype and sham, it would not seek to manipulate its members. Such a nurturing community would be relieved of the burden of pretending that its message is unique. Its attractiveness would be in the comfort it gives and the fellowship it offers, not in its manifestos. And, perhaps above all, it would narrow the gap between our claims and our performance.

A community: We announce ourselves as the People of the Book yet Jewish journalism, for all that it has improved considerably over the last 20 years or so, remains largely an embarrassment. How, then, shall our announcement be believed?

A community: We talk a good game regarding women's rights, yet not one large-city federation is directed by a woman. This is not simply a matter of inevitable structural lag, with women having come late to the field of Jewish communal service. There is considerable cultural lag involved as well, and a genuine community would energetically seek, in this as well as in other respects, to be more inclusive in both its lay and its professional leadership. Similarly: Can we explore the possibility of providing subsidies to agencies that seek to involve non-affluent people or their boards, enabling them to defray the expenses board membership involves?

A community: We stand, presumably, for vigorous debate. Yet during the course of the Begin-Shamir years, the quality of deb:

within the community on the one issue most people cared most about, Israel's safety, was an abomination. And there was no person nor any agency that had either the authority or the prestige to call for an end to the "ad hominem" attacks, the tantrums, the closed-minded smearing of people. So also with regard to the venomous debate on patrilineal descent. Especially now that Israel is at least for the time being not a bone of major contention, can we not approach the level of civility in debate appropriate to a mature community?

A community: Some 80,000 Jews—a very rough estimate—are annually involved in divorce proceedings. Most, presumably, employ Jewish attorneys. We are told that all too often, divorce attorneys exacerbate the ill-feelings that accompany divorce. Might an aggressive Jewish family agency—virtually all our communities have such an agency—not convene the Jewish lawyers who handle divorce and seek to guide them towards a more ameliorative role?

A community: Might we develop some plausible inter-agency ground-rules regarding the kinds of people we choose to honor at our endless dinners, on the theory that one noisy dinner honoring a manifestly disreputable person defeats the benefits of, say, a hundred subsidized trips to Israel?

The examples could, of course, be extended.<sup>18</sup> My purpose here is not to offer a comprehensive catalogue, but to define by example what I intend by my reference to "the ways of the community." Happily, at least some of the building blocks of such a community are readily available; they do not need to be invented. In a synagogue in New Jersey, *bikkur cholim*—visiting the sick—has become a virtual art form, a voluntary but highly organized

<sup>18</sup> One reads with considerable interest, for example, the reports—in the wake of the Buenos Aires bombing—of Jewish resistance in Argentina, early in this century, to the Zwi Migdal, "a Jewish crime syndicate that lured impoverished young Jewish women from Eastern Europe into Argentina and Brazil. Argentine Jews refused to bury the criminals in Jewish cemeteries and organized pickets to bar them from entering synagogues and Yiddish theatres." (*The New York Times*, August 2, 1994.)

program to ensure that the dislocation that attends serious illness will be minimized. In Ithaca, New York, a *chevra hadisha*—burial society—composed of barely observant Jews has become expert not only in the traditions of burial, but also in the literature of bereavement and comfort. Here a synagogue has become a shelter for the homeless; there so many Jews volunteer to staff soup kitchens on Christmas day that there's a waiting list for participation.

How do we begin to reshape the culture of a community? For let there be no mistake: A community that sees itself (or large segments of which see themselves) as a community of purpose, as a community of intention rather than merely of coincidence or of fate, is a very different community from the one we now have.

Still, we do not start from ground zero. The encouraging facts are that there are very many pockets of energy scattered across the continent, that there are many people who would eagerly join the effort, and that the organized community, concerned as it is with the question of continuity, is "available" for new departures as perhaps never before.

It is, however, not enough simply to announce a set of priorities, or even to promulgate a list of potential activities. The folks who will have to take line responsibility for change cannot be reached adequately by language alone, no matter how eloquent or even persuasive. They are busy, they are preoccupied, they are lonely, they are uncertain. In short, they need a helping hand.

Jewish life in this country is lived, in the main, community by community. The needs and capabilities of each community are distinctive, and a program that works in one place will not necessarily work in another. Each program must, therefore, be hand-tailored, adapted to the needs, instincts, and resources of the community that undertakes it. At the same time, there needs to be the sense of excitement that comes of being part of a larger and hence potentially more meaningful whole.

It follows that such programs as we seek to implement do not, each of them, have to respond to all the challenges of our time. Here there may be a modest piece of educational reform, there an



equally modest contribution to *tikkun olam*, in another place a heightened ethical sensitivity or to more effective nurturing. As a strategy for change in so anarchic a community as ours, wholesale revolution is hardly possible. (Nor, for that matter, is it warranted.) Better as rapid a proliferation of piecemeal change as can be generated.

But it follows equally that if a hundred flowers are meant to bloom, someone needs to take responsibility for sending out the seeds and the fertilizer and the instructions for their use.

At which point it is useful to review the short life of the Institute for Jewish Life. Back in the early 1970s, flush with a renewed sense of American Jewish possibilities, the Council of Jewish Federations gave birth to a new agency. The theory was that the Institute for Jewish Life would be a central resource for new ideas in Jewish education, in Jewish culture, in Jewish communal organization. The will was allegedly there, and the job of the Institute was to show the way(s).

In the two or three years before it was changed from a quasi-autonomous agency to a department of the CJF (and, just a few years later, put to death), it accomplished almost nothing. In addition to a variety of organizational problems, it suffered from a misconception that was common in those heady days—to wit, that our problems were essentially technical and tactical, amenable, therefore, to innovative mid-course corrections. So, for example, it was thought that if we could figure out how to do a better job of training teachers, the failure of Jewish education would be repaired. But the problem then, and the problem now, is less in the training of teachers than in coming to some determination of what it is that wants teaching, and why.

In short, change requires that people not only be given seed and fertilizer, but also that they be inspired to plant. The more so here, since, unlike the Institute of the 70s, what is proposed is not a grant-making foundation which has its own built-in "inspiration."

## B. Jewish Education

It is not by accident that this discussion of Jewish communal behavior and its possibilities suggests such immediate educational implications. In my view, every significant communal undertaking, whether by the community-at-large or by its principal organizational entities, should be accompanied by an educational impact statement.

Perhaps it was different back in *heder* days, when young Jews (males only) were immersed in Jewish studies from dawn to dusk and when, presumably, there was a rather more organic connection between what they studied and the culture of the community. These days, when the Jewish education of our children is most often compartmentalized, tucked into a few hours of a schedule filled with other activities generally viewed as "more important," our central educational problem is the apparent irrelevance of the school curriculum to ongoing Jewish life.

No matter how extensively we succeed in reforming Jewish education *per se*, whether through recruiting better teachers, developing more potent curricula, persuading more parents to send their children to day schools, or doubling the number of Jewish summer camps, no reform or combination of reforms can have a fraction of the educational impact that the ways in which our community behaves will have. There is no element of the Jewish curriculum that teaches more about who we are than the facts of what we do, we as an organized community, the prominent members of our community as well.

For how do we make sense out of the words of Isaiah save as we can point to their behavioral relevance in our own time? What do all the lessons of our past add up to if we cannot point to the way in which we have learned and implemented them? Is it not reasonable to assume that a child who grows up in a synagogue that has the kind of *bikkur cholim* society mentioned earlier will be less likely to wonder what the point and purpose of being Jewish is, and what the aims of Jewish education are?

Jewish education, in short, cannot be conceived as a compartment of Jewish life, insulated from the rest of what happens in the community. If, as I have proposed, Judaism is a vocation, then the whole gamut of the community's life is, in effect, a complex system of vocational education. All the texts and traditions, all the stories and the sermons of our people, are, in effect, curricular elements in that system. The most potent ingredient of that curriculum is, of course, our behavior, ranging from the particular stories we choose to transmit to the causes in which we enlist. From our texts, we teach the virtues of idol-smashing; when we join the culture of celebrity, as we do too often in our lecture programs, our behavior defeats our teaching. From our texts, we teach the pursuit of justice; when our homes for the elderly pay their employees sub-standard wages and refuse to let their workers organize, our behavior defeats our teaching. From our texts, we teach respect for life; when a former Chief Rabbi of Israel issues a call for murder, his behavior defeats our teaching. Each aspect of our behavior is a lesson.

And then, of course, there's the more obvious stuff of education, the things that happen in our schools. I leave aside, here, the awesome question of whether a Jewish community that is so massively ignorant as ours can long survive. I am prepared even to leave aside the issue of general Jewish literacy. But I cannot rest the case for social action as a vehicle for Jewish continuity without calling attention to the absence from the curriculum of most of our educational institutions of any serious attention to our history and tradition as an activist people.

### C. *Tikkun Olam*

We would, to be sure, be doing better than we are were we able to become "merely" a rich and nurturing community. But we would not yet reflect the fact that we are meant to be more than an association of people who are comfortable with one another, as compelling as such comfort may be. We are heirs to a religious perspective on the world, and that perspective points us towards *tikkun olam*.

Some Jews are satisfied to pay vague homage to the tradition of pursuing justice that seems somehow to come with being Jewish, but that is dishonest; a concern for justice does not just "come," it is not in our genes. Justice and compassion and all those other things we value are transmitted from generation to generation through the living community, through what it chooses to remember and how it chooses to live.

Other Jews try to "renew our days as of old," whether old be the times of the shtetl or of Birmingham, Selma, and the March on Washington. Imitation of days gone by flatters those who came before, but it, too, is dishonest; these are neither the 1860s nor the 1960s. Whichever the yesterday we try to copy, we will fail, for yesterday was not an abstraction. It was a specific point in space and time and a specific community living and responding there and then. Here and now, it is our own story we must write, and live. That is the starting place for authenticity.

When social action is joined to the tradition, both are enhanced—and, thereby, also the community that embraces them. The tradition comes alive in a new and more urgent way, and the actions it commands take on greater weight and provide greater meaning. When we feed the hungry, we nurture ourselves. When we, together, take any social problem as our own, and respond to it successfully, our morale is raised, and hence our ambition, too. In 1971, the Roman Catholic Synod of Bishops asserted that "Action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world fully appear to us as a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the gospel, or, in other words, of the church's mission for the redemption of the human race and its liberation from every oppressive situation." Charles E. Curran (the Catholic theologian who, in 1987, was relieved by the Vatican of his teaching duties at the Catholic University of America) details the unfolding view of the Church in his book *Toward an American Catholic Theology*, and goes on to observe that "One can have magnificent liturgy, great preaching, and a marvelous internal community life, but without a social mission one does not have church or the gospel. . . . If the church does not become involved

in social transformation, it has betrayed the gospel and its own redemptive mission."

So also with us, for without such a sense of mission, of purpose, what real difference can it make whether we continue to cling together? As I earlier observed, people can find other and easier communities if it is only community they seek.

Accordingly, *tikkun olam*, the mending of the world, our most ancient and most honorable tradition and commitment.

*Tikkun olam*: Might there not be responsible ways for masses of Jews to become involved in helping, through tutoring, overcome the scandal of illiteracy in this country?

*Tikkun olam*: Can Jewish federations be persuaded to deposit their funds in community banks?

*Tikkun olam*: Can we not encourage Jews in positions of economic, social, and political power to deal fairly with those who suffer? Are there communal sanctions that might be employed to help accomplish this? (In the old days, obvious miscreants were denied the honor of being called to the Torah during worship services. What might work today?)

Again, the examples could be readily multiplied; one need only inquire of people across the country to learn that we are even now engaged in an impressive array of initiatives, programs, efforts of one kind or another that reflect a continuing commitment to the pursuit of justice. Yet, whether because of our organizational fragmentation, or because our efforts, however impressive, pale in the face of the problems our nation faces, or because they seem (and mostly are) marginal to the more obvious concerns of the community, it is doubtful whether young people perceive us as a community deeply devoted to fighting the good fight.

#### D. Getting There

No matter how ringing our rhetoric nor how convincing the case we make, there will be no sudden revolution. Our community will remain anarchic, an aggregation of diverse understandings and agendas. If it is a transformation of our community that we seek, the task that awaits is inherently painstaking; one agency at a time, one geographic community at a time. Perhaps, once we're well along, the center of communal gravity will be perceived as having shifted. But first there's much work, most of it quite undramatic, to be done.

We need a mechanism that can generate and disseminate the kinds of ideas here offered as examples, and that can call more general attention to the work that is being done. As things stand, the East Coast knoweth not what the West Coast doeth, and so forth. There are committees and conventions where information is meant to be disseminated, but for whatever the reason, the process does not seem to work. Organizations large and small develop projects and programs and carry them out to greater or lesser effect. There is, by and large, no coherence to the effort, and while some of our projects and programs are quite imaginative and even, sometimes, productive, they are almost always terribly modest. They may be quite meaningful to those who participate directly in them, but they fail as publicly accessible statements of what the Jews are about.

Plainly, people need both information—attractive ideas as well as step-by-step guides to their implementation—and a nudge, as well. They need help in expanding their sense of Jewish possibility. But we ought not limit ourselves to such incremental advances. It would not take much by way of investment to generate a social action agenda of substantial scale, one that would include but go beyond small-scale projects appropriate to local institutions, one that would include, *inter alia*, showcase projects requiring the coordination of a variety of communal agencies.

And, beyond the mere development of such an agenda, there is the work of its implementation. People generally tailor their sense

of the possible to fit their experience. "Selling" a more ambitious social action agenda will require an argument not from experience but from imagination, or from logic, or from example, or from religious conviction, or from communal need—e.g., from the need to promote Jewish continuity. And then it will require nuts and bolts development and, of course, financial support.

One possibility: The creation of a service agency, a community consulting service, brought into being by all the world-menders and community-menders we can gather. Think of that aggregation of people, for now, as distributed over a normal curve, with the one tail encompassing people who are principally devoted to the internal life of the community, the other tail composed of people whose principal activities are in the larger world. The key group is the center group, people equally comfortable in both worlds, equally committed to the repair of both.

And now consider that the actual distribution of such people is not along a normal curve at all. The curve is, in almost certain fact, U-shaped. And that's precisely the problem. The task of building a bridge between the two larger populations falls to the rather small group in the middle. Unless and until we can bring the two groups together, make the case to the universalists that their work (and their own lives, too) would be enriched and strengthened if they were to connect to the community, make the case to the particularists that their work (and their own lives, too) would be enriched and strengthened if it were linked to the broader social agenda, we will be hampered in the work of social action and in the work of Jewish continuity.

The agency's mission would be to preach the integrity of a vision of Jewish life, communal and personal, rooted in *tikkun olam*, and to train people in various forms of community organization and consultation who would then be sent out to agencies, institutions, and communities that want help in making the vision come alive. It would act as a clearing house for ideas that work. It would offer nuts and bolts advice on the elements of a nurturing community. It would advise folks who are looking for help in getting something new started and those who want to recast

existing structures. Ideally, it would in time have part-time people scattered across the country ready and able to act in the manner of agricultural agents, available both to respond to requests for assistance and to propose, proactively, new departures.

That's a very substantial mission, but it seems to me that the current sense of crisis gives an agency such as the one here proposed a shot at being accepted.

But that leaves hanging how such an agency will do the things that want and need doing. To be born with the blessing of current activists is to be born (one hopes) with credibility, but not yet with competence. To get from here to competence requires, *inter alia*, a shift in the emphasis of the training programs in Jewish communal service, as well as substantially more interaction among the agents of change. And considerable attention will have to be devoted to recruiting, as part of its available resource pool, the very best and the very brightest we have. This must come to be widely seen as where the exciting action is.

If it works properly, its work will be inclusive—here it will broker a more spiritually oriented effort, there an effort more traditional in its aspect. Here the constituency will be new age in orientation, there it will be old age. No matter. We ought to be able to respond to all while threatening none. The effort does not require that we condemn the current. We propose simply to add a new and very attractive feature to the present. And if, in the course of our work, the community finds itself transformed in important ways (may that come to pass *bim'heira b'yameinu*), so be it.

And yet another merit: By weaving the activists into a loose confederation, the agency will raise their morale, hence also their energy level.

Another possibility: Can we, like the Mandel efforts in Jewish education, designate one or two or three communities as laboratories for an approach to Jewish continuity that builds on the approach here put forward? We might prepare guidelines and invite proposals, but the more likely avenue would be to enter a

community where we know we have important allies and then, through a series of meetings with key actors, undertake a three or a five year program focusing on community building and social action. A successful effort would involve, even at the local community level, far more cooperation than is our norm, but with appropriate incentives—money, personnel—and, again, working with people predisposed to such an approach, we might be able to demonstrate the benefits of a coherent communal endeavor. Model cities, anyone?

Whatever else, the effort ought not be regarded as modest, experimental. If it is to accomplish what it needs to accomplish, its birth should be an event. Otherwise, the effort will be just another sweet initiative that will fall far, far short of the transformation we seek.

## V. CODA

It is time to imagine and then invent a strategy for Jewish continuity that hinges more on the "how" of Judaism than on the "why" of it, a Judaism in which the "why" is immediately implied by the "how." It is time to build a community whose ways are a complete response to the question of why we should be, in which the home of Israel is not merely the place where when you have to go there, they have to take you in, but a place so magical and so nurturing and so satisfying and so ambitious and so purposeful that when the modern world hands you, as it does and as it will, a change of address card, you'll say, "No, thanks, this is not only where I belong, this is where I choose to stay. There are still idols to be smashed, there is still justice to be pursued, there is still mending to be done."

**The Nathan Cummings Foundation**  
**Jewish Life Program**  
**1926 Broadway, Suite 600**  
**New York, NY 10023**  
**212-787-7300**

**December 1994**      **Single Copy \$3.50**  
**Quantity prices on request**