

Commentary

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What Do American Jews Believe? *A Symposium*

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heritages share and where they diverge. The dissonance between them ought to enlarge our perspective; each should be a lens through which we critically examine our worlds and determine what will be our individual and communal missions. We live with two distinct and sometimes conflicting stories and value-systems; the dialectic between them can lead to creativity and wide-awakeness, in place of the stagnation and complacency which are antithetical to religious life.

God, chosenness, messiah, Israel, revelation—these are ideas which, despite different beliefs about them, must call us to study, reflection, action, identity, and community. They will do that most effectively if we lay aside currently divisive statements about what Jews believe and start instead with the adventure which we share. We are living in a time when individualism and personal freedom are leading to a search for community and shared meaning. This search can bring about Jewish revival only if more and more Jews are drawn into and captivated by the world of authentic Torah study in its complexity, difficulty, richness, and diversity.

When we develop a deep relationship with Torah and with each other, differences and disputes will be seen as evidence of vibrancy and growth rather than of divisiveness. Then, when our relationship with Torah and with each other has matured enough to weather difficulty and discord, and when we have begun to construct rich religious lives, we can turn to eternal questions of belief productively and openly.

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I BELIEVE THAT the experience of Sinai established the authority of the Torah, both written and oral, for the community of Israel, including all later generations of Jews. Because I accept the authority of the Torah, I am obligated to believe in God, in the traditional teaching that the Torah is from heaven, and in the binding nature of all the commandments. As Mai-

monides classified it, belief in God is a positive commandment of the Torah and a proper subject of prescription. I infer from this that belief in God is not solely a matter of faith or personal religious insight, and therefore need not be confined to those who have been granted the gift of a religious personality. Rather, belief can in part be willed and is conditioned by religious practice.

The precise nature of divine revelation can be understood in a wide variety of ways, as rabbinic sources attest. The crucial point for me is that Sinai initiated the oral-law tradition and that the content of divine revelation can only be known through, and determined by, that tradition. In the course of its history, this tradition has grown dramatically as it has responded to changed conditions and new modes of thought. Nonetheless, a cornerstone of the *halakhhic* system is that laws determined to be based in divine origin cannot be abrogated. As such, the system is in tension with the contemporary idea that everything, whether laws, beliefs, or human nature itself, is subject to revision and change. Because my allegiance to the conceptual world of the *halakhhah* is primary, I believe that I am obligated to evaluate present sensibilities in light of its assumptions and principles and not the reverse.

The *halakhhah* is the specific, normative formulation of ethical, philosophic, historic, and religious ideals, but it is not reducible to them. Although the oral-law tradition itself explores the nature of the commandments, identifying some as rational and others as nonrational, all the commandments are deemed equally binding because of their source in divine revelation. Whatever my own level of observance, I can identify no intellectual basis for creating a hierarchy of commandments—except for the extent recognized by the *halakhhah* itself—or for singling out for observance those which at present can be explained on ethical or social grounds.

In classical Jewish sources, chosenness is defined in terms of the giving of the Torah, which commands that Israel become a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. According to one rabbinic commentary, God chose the Jews and threatened to bury them under the mountain of Sinai if they did not accept the Torah. According to another, the people of Israel, unlike all other nations, voluntarily chose to commit themselves to the Torah. The first implies that the very existence of a distinct Jewish nation is dependent on adherence to the Torah. The second invites ex-

ploration of the particular characteristics that enabled an already constituted group to submit to the obligations of the Torah. On either reading, the concept of chosenness has historically been a focus of self-definition; and in either case I believe that the distinctive role of the Jewish people, now as in the past, is to observe the commandments and, through their performance, to advance the religious and social goals of the Torah.

The Torah addresses Jews directly and also, through the Noahide laws, humanity. Thus, Jews have distinct obligations, defined by the Torah, not only to God and their fellow Jews but also to the world at large. They have a duty to promote a just social order and to promulgate those aspects of the Torah that have universal application. But I regard as a serious distortion the still-prevalent idea that Jews were chosen to pursue a particular political agenda, or that the great figures of Israel's past, especially the prophets, are significant only insofar as they serve as role models for modern-day social activists.

As for Jewish messianism, a complex topic, I view this theme as primarily a means of motivating communal behavior in the present, not as focusing on the spiritual qualities of a single, identifiable individual.

My religious identity and observance, if not my faith, have been tremendously strengthened by the fact of the Holocaust. To me, as a child of European parents and grandparents who experienced some of its horrors, and who emerged with a profound sense of joy at having been able to observe most of Jewish law even while hiding, it is inconceivable that I, who live at a time when it is extraordinarily easy to remain an observant Jew, should either break the chain of tradition or fail to communicate to my children the joyous aspects of observance. From the perspective of faith, I do not view the Holocaust as presenting a challenge to Jewish belief qualitatively different in kind from that posed by prior catastrophes.

In contrast to the Holocaust, the overriding theme of which is the absence of God, the existence of the state of Israel in the face of great odds and the dramatic ingathering of exiles have provided me with a sense of the hand of God acting in history. Yet the manner in which American Jewry focuses its energy on advancing Zionism and memorializing the Holocaust—treating both as having paramount meaning in Jewish life, completely divorced from Jewish tradition and

practice—threatens to deflect attention from the main goal: to perpetuate Jewish spiritual, and not solely physical, continuity.

America is an extraordinarily friendly environment for Jews, offering enormous opportunities to become both prosperous and politically and socially prominent. Jewish continuity is furthered to the extent that Jews seize this opportunity to pursue their own legitimate, particularist agenda and beliefs. At the same time, Jewish continuity is threatened by the ease with which Jews may assimilate into American society at the highest level. Jews in America tend to believe that these two paths—the promotion of Jewish tradition and a high level of achievement within American society—are mutually exclusive. This assumption may once have been accurate, but the increasing number of committed and observant Jews in positions of prominence shows that it is no longer the case. Recognition of this new reality holds out the greatest hope for Jewish continuity in America over the long run.

Even though I am extremely troubled by the deep divisions among American Jewry, it is not the lack of religious unity *per se* that concerns me. I am concerned, instead, that a majority of identified Jews in America are under the umbrella of Jewish denominational bodies which, in my opinion, cannot perpetuate themselves. First, the level of ignorance of classical Jewish sources within these bodies is, if not unprecedented in Jewish society, certainly unprecedented among those who take it upon themselves to declare the response of Judaism to the complexity of contemporary life. Second, in the final analysis, I do not believe a movement which denies the authority of the *halakhab* will survive over time as a Jewish movement.

Unless there is a profound change in the commitment of the liberal denominational movements to a Torah education and observance of the *halakhic* tradition, I do not see any prospect of a large-scale revival of Judaism out of what is, at present, the largest segment of the American Jewish population. I hope there will be an increasing number of thoughtful people who jump the fence toward more traditional Jewish institutional life. As a matter of demographics, there already has been a profound revival of Judaism among the most traditional element, and given the extremely high continuity rate in those circles and their rate of procreation, one can anticipate geometric growth in the ranks of the most strongly committed. I suspect that, over time,

this will become the dominant strain in American Judaism.

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David A. Teutsch

IT HAS been said that Jews can be divided into two groups—those who believe that the world is unlikely to change very much (non-messianists) and those who believe that the world can move toward perfection (messianists). I count myself among the messianists even though I certainly do not believe in a personal messiah. A key part of my abiding faith is that human beings are capable of improving ourselves and our world. Jewish tradition's demand that we improve ourselves and our world speaks powerfully to me, as do the opportunities Jewish living provides to celebrate our highest values and the full meaning of life.

The Torah presents the record of the earliest efforts of the Jewish people to discover the divine in human history and shape our shared life in light of the divine. Thus the Torah reflects both its historical context and profound insights into moral and spiritual truth. The shared communal life that has developed out of Jewish interpretations of Torah embodies the moral and spiritual tasks that have long been central to the Jewish people's commitments.

I believe that Mordecai M. Kaplan, the founder of Reconstructionism, was right when he said that one of the unique characteristics of the Jewish people is our concern with what has ultimate importance in human life. The *mitzvah* system leads to an awareness of the transcendent value in human life and guides us to living in a moral and spiritual fashion that has redemptive power not only for us as individuals, but for us as a collective. Those actions recommended by Jewish tradition—both old and new—which achieve that end are truly *mitzvot*. Those parts which are only historically bound or out of keep-

ing with the best values and practices of our time are no longer *mitzvot*.

Central to our struggle as Jews is the obligation to distinguish those parts of our inherited tradition that continue to have meaning from those that do not. This struggle can only take place authentically in the context of Jewish community, which provides the essential experiences that shape our inheritance of Judaism, our consciousness, and our intuition. It is the community that provides a sense of continuity and the fundamental context for the development of Jewish identity. It is also the community that as a collective can point toward the divine and make moral and spiritual demands upon its members.

I very much feel the presence of the divine in nature, in community, and in the workings of my own heart. It is up to us to seek God, however, because God is not a divine person Who intrudes in our life or makes individual decisions, but rather the unifying dimension of our reality that is the ground of meaning and morality.

If indeed we are seekers of the divine, then it is also up to us—and to other peoples as well—to choose God. God is not one Who chooses. Therefore, I do not believe it is sensible to talk about Jews as the chosen people. Aside from the theological problem chosenness presents, it raises a fundamental moral problem of triumphalism and competition. The Jewish people has a unique role and purpose that grows out of our historical experience and our struggle to make the divine manifest. Other peoples also have their unique place in the world. It is up to us to fulfill our own destiny just as it is up to other peoples to fulfill theirs.

As one who grew up in a home deeply affected by my parents' refugee status and German background, I must of course acknowledge that the Holocaust has had an impact on me. But that has not been critical in determining my observance or identity as a Jew. Rather, it has deepened the demand I make upon myself for rigorous moral action, and the passion with which I believe each of us has a solemn obligation to make moral demands on the people around us. The state of Israel has undoubtedly been an important factor in my identification with the Jewish people. I have spent extensive time there both studying and exploring. It is hard for me to imagine what it would have been like to grow up as a Jew without the state of Israel. In our time, it is the source not only of immersion in Hebrew language and Jewish geography; it is also a source of pride and identity.