WHAT IS A JEW?

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A GUIDE TO THE BELIEFS, TRADITIONS, AND PRACTICES OF JUDAISM THAT ANSWERS QUESTIONS FOR BOTH JEW AND NON-JEW

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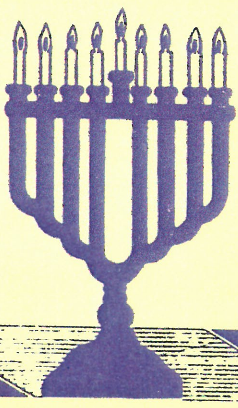

It is hard to discuss Jews, Judaism, Jewish beliefs, Jewish spirituality, or Jewish anything, without first describing Jewish community. Not that Jews are a tightly knit group united on everything. Far from it. Community does not mean unanimity of opinion, or commonality of action.

But being a Jew does mean having a profound love and respect for the ideal of community. It means seeing yourself as a sacred link between past and future, a link that is shared with all other Jews of your generation, forming a sort of mystical continuity.

It also means believing, as Jews do, that however much we may disagree on things, we have a common destiny. Hitler did not ask what kind of Jews he killed. They were all the same to him. The State of Israel does not ask what kind of Jew you are, if you try to escape persecution by moving there; any Jew can claim immediate citizenship in the Jewish state. Moreover, we believe that we shall accomplish God's task not singly, but together with other Jews. We pray in a group of at least ten people (see p. 86)—symbolic of community. We believe in redemption for all the world, brought about by communities of Jews working together to instill in every single Jew the best that God has given us.

Being Jewish also means formulating some common concerns—fighting anti-Semitism, educating the next Jewish genera-

tion, helping Israel, bettering society by applying the ethics of Judaism to business and to public policy, and the like. For those purposes, Jewish organizations are founded. The mystical community therefore is actualized through real community building and action.

Jewish community is positive, not negative; it is open, not closed; anyone who wishes to link his or her own personal destiny to that of the community that began with Abraham and Sarah, so many years ago, may join it.

This section describes Jewish community, past and present, and prepares us for questions about what that community believes, what its ethics are, and so forth. The first questions deal with the community of today, defining Orthodox, Reform, Conservative, Reconstructionist, and chavurah Judaism: the religious options of contemporary Judaism. Then we look briefly at several special cases taken from the community of history: the Pharisees, the Rabbis, Chasidim, Sephardim, Ashkenazim, and Zionists. Finally, we return to the present, looking at the way the Jewish community actually operates, and how it relates to the non-Jewish community in which it exists.

QUESTIONS IN PART I

1. *What Is a Jew?*
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12. *Who Speaks with Authority for the Jews?*
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1. *What Is a Jew?*

It is difficult to find a single definition of a Jew.

A Jew is one who accepts the faith of Judaism. That is the *religious definition*.

A Jew is one who seeks a spiritual base in the modern world by living the life of study, prayer, and daily routine dedicated to the proposition that Jewish wisdom through the ages will answer the big questions in life—questions like, Why do people suffer? What is life's purpose? Is there a God? That is the *spiritual definition*.

A Jew is one who, without formal religious affiliation, and possibly with little Jewish practice, regards the teachings of Judaism—its ethics, its folkways, its literature—as his or her own. That is the *cultural definition*.

Judaism has also been called "a civilization," so that Jews are a cultural group, primarily religious, but not exclusively so, linked by a self-perception of enjoying a common history, a common language of prayer, a vast literature, folkways, and above all, a sense of common destiny. In this sense, Jews would be *a people*, not in the national or racial sense—but in a feeling of oneness. Judaism is this people's way of life.

There is an *ethnic definition* too. Once, Jews were almost inevitably born as Jews. Growing up in Jewish neighborhoods, they took for granted the folkways of their parents and grandparents. They

were very much an ethnic group. Increasingly nowadays, however, the Jewish community includes people who have converted to Judaism, or who were born as Jews but were raised with no ethnic identity whatever. In a sense, all Jews are Jews by choice today, since even born Jews now have to make the conscious decision that they will remain Jewish, rather than join another religion or become nothing in particular. The ethnic definition is going the way of the dinosaur.

> A Jew is therefore a member of a people, by birth or by conversion, who chooses to share a common cultural heritage, a religious perspective, and a spiritual horizon derived uniquely from Jewish experience and Jewish wisdom.

An important part of any valid definition is what a Jew is not. To begin with, the Jews are not a race. Our history reveals countless additions to our numbers through marriage and conversion. There are dark Jews and blond, tall Jews and short; there are blue-eyed, brown-eyed, and hazel-eyed Jews as well as those whose eyes are jet black. Though most Jews are of the white or Caucasian race, there are black African Jews from Ethiopia and African-American Jews in the United States; until recently, there were Chinese Jews in Kai-Fung-Fu and there still are Jewish communities in various places on the subcontinent of India.

It would be equally misleading to speak of the Jews as a nation, though in antiquity they were. Today, Jewish, Moslem, and Christian citizens of Israel do constitute a nation, with Jews the majority and Jewish culture predominant. But there are no national ties that unite all Jews throughout the world.

Jews are part and parcel of every community in which we live. But we share with Jews everywhere the distinctive traditions of Judaism and, to a historically unique degree, a sense of a common destiny. "All Jews are responsible for one another," goes a talmudic adage.

That is why Jews raise and spend enormous amounts of money to save other Jews halfway around the world, Jews of different races, Jews who speak languages we never heard of, Jews who practice

Judaism in ways that differ markedly from our own. In 1948–49, "Operation Magic Carpet" airlifted forty-four thousand persecuted Yemenite Jews into Israel; in 1991, fourteen thousand Ethiopian Jews were saved by an equally miraculous "Operation Solomon," a thirty-six-hour airlift that rescued a Jewish community on the verge of extinction. Jewish responsibility extends beyond the Jewish people, of course (more on that later). But to be a Jew is to recognize the bond of peoplehood, the tie of community that knows no geographical boundaries.

Finally, Jews are not free to believe or practice just anything they want. We shall see, for example (pp. 275, 284), that they do not keep Christmas, or believe that Jesus is the son of God. What Jews believe, the rituals they follow, and the moral code that governs their behavior are the topics of later chapters.

2. *What Are Orthodox Jews?*

Until the nineteenth century, all Jews could best be described as premodern. There were different kinds of Jews then, just as there are now, but the differences were between Ashkenazim and Sephardim (see p. 23), or Chasidim and Mitnagdim (see p. 20). There was as yet no Orthodoxy.

In the nineteenth century, some modern Jews, primarily in Germany, undertook to reform their medieval tradition so as to bring it up to date with the optimistic rationalism of their time. Those Jews who objected to such changes in age-old traditions became the first Orthodox Jews. To this day, Orthodoxy is that brand of Judaism that most resists change, on the grounds that the Torah (see p. 39) was literally given to Moses on Mount Sinai, so that no law deduced from it may be tampered with even if our modern sensitivities do not like what the law says.

There are many kinds of Orthodox Jews. Some are fundamentalists who do not even recognize the Jewish state (even though they may live there), on the grounds that it was established by human

beings, not by God. By contrast, modern (or centrist) Orthodoxy is a movement that tries to harmonize ancient traditions with contemporary perspectives. Nevertheless, if modern ideas (such as feminism) conflict with traditional teachings, the tradition always takes priority. Thus Orthodox women retain traditional roles in the home, and they may not become rabbis; in the synagogue they sit separately from men during prayer and are not counted in the minyan [MIN-y'n or min-YAHN], the quorum required for public worship (see p. 86).

The basis of belief and practice for Orthodox Jews is the traditional body of Jewish doctrine recorded in the Talmud (see p. 47) and codified over time in a series of law codes, especially the Shulchan Arukh (see p. 52). The name given to the entire legal tradition based on the Talmud and the law codes is halachah [hah-lah-KHAH] (see p. 53). Orthodox Jews search out the halachah in Talmud, codes, and commentaries, and then live by it, regardless of how modern thought or personal conscience may view the practice in question.

Of America's 6 million Jews, approximately 6 percent identified themselves as Orthodox in 1990, a decline of 5 percent from the 11 percent figure reported in 1970.

3. *What Are Reform Jews?*

Reform Jews believe that Jewish tradition has always been in a state of flux, since Judaism itself is an evolving entity. They trace their roots to nineteenth-century Europe, when Jews who had just been freed from the ghettos tried to make premodern Judaism responsive to the changing conditions of their newly found civil status.

Reform Jews are committed to the eternal validity of Jewish tradition, but they emphasize the need to interpret that tradition from the perspective of individual conscience and informed choice. They believe, therefore, that Jews must study Jewish tradition. Whenever possible, they should adapt it to modern life. They may

question ancient practices or attitudes that are inconsistent with the life of a modern person, and they may reject those ancient or medieval teachings that run contrary to one's moral conscience and contemporary spirituality.

Reform Jews study the same books that Orthodox Jews do—that is, they consult halachah too. But in the end, their individual conscience is their guide to what they accept as valid for our time. For example, Reform Jews were the first to declare women equal to men. They admit women to the rabbinate, not because the halachah is egalitarian, but because modern life informs our conscience that gender inequality could not possibly be what God wants.

Reform Judaism can be described by its different stages.

Classical Reform Judaism predominated until the 1960s. It was a brave new vision of the possibility of being Jewish and modern at the same time. Recognizing that Jews no longer had to live in ghettos, Reform Jews dreamed of working together with their non-Jewish neighbors to perfect a world of justice and of peace. They reread the Bible and focused on the prophetic mandate to champion the cause of society's victims. Emphasizing also the Jewish discovery of the one true God, they defined Judaism as a religion of ethical monotheism, fully compatible with scientific truth, reason, and evolution. In their synagogues, Reform Jews introduced such modern "innovations" as decorum, a sermon, choirs, and prayer in the vernacular rather than in Hebrew alone.

Reform Judaism then turned to its past, doing away with many medieval practices and rituals on the grounds that they were just the husk of Judaism that could safely be stripped away, leaving only the kernel, the things that truly mattered: ethics, monotheism, universalism, and reason. It eliminated many antiquated customs rooted in superstitious folklore or the outmoded perspective of the Middle Ages. However, it also took steps that later Reform Jews would consider too extreme, officially opposing Zionism, for instance, and allowing universalism almost completely to negate concern for Jewish peoplehood.

By the 1960s, however, Reform Judaism had undergone con-

siderable change, and initiated a *postclassical period*. It retained its primary commitments, like the priority of an individual's conscience, the belief that Judaism must change with the times, and the commitment to social action derived from the biblical prophetic vision of a world without such social ills as poverty, discrimination, and war. It remained committed to ethical monotheism, and reaffirmed more strongly than ever its belief that the one true God demands an absolute commitment to justice, universal harmony among peoples everywhere, and such elementary rights as human dignity and freedom. But it reacted also to claims that it had thrown out the baby with the bath water. It took another look at tradition and reclaimed things that previous generations had discarded: greater support for Jewish peoplehood, for instance. It thus recaptured much of tradition, adopted Zionism as a primary religious value, and urged support for specifically Jewish causes as well as universal ones.

Reform worship is therefore a combination of tradition and modernity. It features prayer both in Hebrew and in English (or any vernacular); its music is both ancient and modern, vocal and instrumental. There is complete gender equality in its temples. Reform Jews enjoy a greater flexibility in worship, since the Reform prayer book contains both the traditional legacy of prayers and many new readings on traditional themes. Its sacred music too encompasses both the oldest chants and melodies that Jews have used and modern music too, either with or without instrumental accompaniment. In its classical period, Reform Judaism did away with such traditional prayer garb as the tallit (tah-LEET—see p. 91) and kippah (kee-PAH—see p. 90). But in its postclassical phase, it emphasizes informed choice as a principle, so it now asks worshipers (men and women) to either wear these things or not, depending on their own spiritual needs.

Today North American Jewry is about 42 percent Reform, making Reform Judaism the largest and fastest-growing Jewish movement.

4. *What Are Conservative Jews?*

The founders of Conservative Judaism, known in Europe as Historical Judaism, were a group of German Jewish scholars who viewed Judaism as the evolving religious culture of the Jewish people. They embraced Jewish ethnicity and Jewish law (halachah), but understood both in the light of contemporary historical scholarship. A second generation of scholars transmitted these ideas to America, where Conservative Judaism was transformed into a movement.

Originally, its primary appeal here was to eastern European immigrants who arrived in America during the first decades of this century. They wanted to be modern, but felt uncomfortable in Reform temples, which lacked the warmth and traditional appeal of their hometown synagogues back in Europe. Moreover, it was clear that Reform congregants, who by and large hailed from central rather than eastern Europe and had already gone through a process of Americanization, looked down on them. Furthermore, even though these eastern European newcomers did not follow all Jewish laws, they nonetheless respected them in principle and were not ready to abandon publicly the dietary code, Hebrew prayer, and the Sabbath and festival regulations. They also embraced many Jewish folkways that their Reform coreligionists had abandoned.

Philosophically and theologically, Conservative Judaism stands between Orthodoxy and Reform. Like the Orthodox and unlike Reform, Conservative Jews accept Jewish law as the primary Jewish expression for all time. For them, the halachah is a living, growing entity that changes to meet new circumstances. Thus, the ultimate grounds for making personal decisions for them is not individual conscience, as it is for Reform Jews, but the consensus of learned scholars and the accepted practice of the community. Change, for this reason, does come about, but more slowly and deliberately than it does in Reform Judaism.

For example, it was only in 1985 that the Conservative move-

ment began ordaining women as rabbis, since doing so went counter to the way Jewish law had been interpreted up to that point. As its grounds for accepting women rabbis, Reform Judaism simply affirmed our modern moral consciousness, which insists on gender equality; change thus occurred relatively rapidly, with the first Reform woman rabbi being ordained in 1972. But Conservative Judaism was able to take the same action only after sustained study of halachah by its leading legal scholars. Only after Jewish legal sources were reinterpreted to admit the possibility of women rabbis could the Conservative movement formally alter its policy of admitting men alone to the rabbinate. In due time, however, at least a majority of the rabbis assembled to study the matter provided such a reinterpretation, and women were added to the seminary rolls.

Today, Conservative Judaism defines its synagogue practices as traditional but modern. In most, but not all, Conservative synagogues, women are admitted as equal participants in the service. The service retains its traditional flavor, with men (and some women) donning traditional Jewish prayer garb (the tallit, kippah, and tefillin—see pp. 91, 90, 92). Hebrew is still the principal language of prayer.

The middle road did not please all Conservative Jews. Two groups have broken away. On the left is Reconstructionism (see below), and in 1985, a right-wing splinter group called the Union for Traditional Judaism was founded in opposition to the acceptance of women as rabbis. It is too early to know whether the latter group will last. In 1990, approximately 40 percent of North American Jews claimed to be Conservative, but the number was shrinking from what it had been ten years earlier.

5. *What Are Reconstructionist Jews?*

Reconstructionist Jews trace their origin to the philosophy of Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan, a leading American Jewish thinker during the first half of the twentieth century. Kaplan believed that Judaism is an evolving religious civilization, comprising three primal elements: God, Torah, and the People of Israel. In addition, this civilization embraces the Land of Israel, the Hebrew language, and various folkways. Though Kaplan taught at the seminary of the Conservative movement, he broke with his colleagues over theology. Wanting to make room for a broad spectrum of people who emphasized different aspects of Jewish civilization, he taught that God, Torah, and Israel were all equal elements in Judaism. Any Jews wanting to seek out God, study Torah, or even just associate with other Jews were welcomed by him, even if they were not, strictly speaking, religious.

Kaplan failed to institute his views at the Conservative seminary, so in 1935, he founded a magazine called *The Reconstructionist*, urging that Judaism be "reconstructed" for modern American Jews. He once described "reconstruction" as "more drastic than reform and less disturbing than revolution." Tradition, he maintained, "should have a vote but not a veto."

Among the innovations such a reconstruction would require would be the realization that even secular Jewish activity has a place in Judaism—some Jews, after all, would want to associate with the Jewish People, but not search out God or study Torah. Kaplan therefore advocated building not only synagogues, but Jewish centers, where worship spaces and classrooms are combined with such things as a gymnasium and a pool.

Early Reconstructionists adopted Kaplan's own theological views, some of which were (and still are) considered radical. He did not believe in a personal God. Instead, he thought of God as a force, like gravity, built into the very structure of the universe. God, he said, is the "power that makes for salvation." By salvation,

however, he meant nothing otherworldly, but just the guarantee that our striving after ethical behavior and personal satisfaction is not in vain. Since the universe is constructed to enable us to gain personal happiness and communal solidarity when we act morally, it follows that there is a moral force in the universe; this force is what the Reconstructionists mean by God.

Kaplan intended his Reconstructionist Foundation merely to propagate his views, not to form a separate movement in Judaism. Indeed, he was highly successful in inculcating his philosophy into the personal views of many rabbis, in both the Reform and the Conservative camps.

Nonetheless, Reconstructionism did become its own movement, though in keeping with Kaplan's own recognition that Judaism must evolve, it has developed in ways that Kaplan could not have imagined, even adopting positions in conflict with some of Kaplan's own most strongly held beliefs. For example, while many Reconstructionists still believe in God as a natural force, others are willing to affirm the existence of a personal God once again.

Still, Reconstructionism remains true to Kaplan's vision of Judaism as a total civilization. In ritual, it remains traditional, but in ideology, it adopts many nontraditional views (it ordains women, for instance), just as its founder did. It emphasizes the decision-making role of the community, rather than the individual, and in that sense, as well as in its ritual, it resembles Conservative more than Reform Judaism.

Reconstructionism is the smallest movement in Judaism. In 1990, less than 2 percent of North American Jews said they were Reconstructionist.