

The Reconstructionist
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Table of Contents

3 **From the Editor**

The Challenges and Opportunities of Openness

- 5 *Jacob Staub*, Flexible Boundaries
12 *Herb Levine*, Jewish Boundaries and American Openness
18 *Rami M. Shapiro*, The Boundariless Universe
24 *Shefa Gold*, An Open House

Boundaries in Jewish-Christian Interface

- 30 *Mordechai Liebling*, The Non-Jew in the Synagogue
36 *Carol Harris-Shapiro*, Messianic Jews as Mirror
44 *Cy Swartz*, When Jews and Christians Celebrate
49 *Nancy Fuchs-Kreimer*, Sibling Rivals (an essay-review)

Boundaries in Jewish-Buddhist Interface:

Responses to Rodger Kamenetz, *The Jew in the Lotus*

- 53 *Sheila Peltz Weinberg*, Many Voices in One Mind
59 *Joy Levitt*, Dialogue with the Dalai Lama

Boundaries in Jewish Decision-Making

- 64 *Edward Feld*, Can Halakhah Live?
73 *Neil Gillman*, Authority and Parameters in Jewish
 Decision-Making
80 *Adina Newberg*, Boundaries in Reconstructionist Synagogues
88 *Robert Tabak*, The Rabbi as Gatekeeper

FROM THE EDITOR

About This Issue

Two sentences from Sheila Weinberg's essay on Jewish-Buddhist dialogue capture the essence of the debate in this issue of *The Reconstructionist*. "In recent generations, so much energy has been put into 'staying Jewish,' so much Jewish practice and thought is dedicated to keeping Jews separate. I am aware of a great longing in me to lower the walls of separation as a spirit-seeking being, while simultaneously fearing that union will spell annihilation of Jewish identity." Her language captures the urgency of the debate among these articles: some writers urge the lowering of walls, others, their rebuilding, while still others urge that we reconfigure walls to include doors and windows.

The impulse for this issue comes from the reality of the world we live in, where yesterday's firm boundaries are often today's open doors. How do we respond to the challenges and opportunities of that openness, knowing who we are and have been, while growing and evolving into the best version of the Jewish people we can be? How do we maintain the universalism-amidst-particularism that is such a hallmark of the Reconstructionist approach to Judaism, when the ideological climate fostered by the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey is toward ever greater emphasis on particularism? And how do we maintain our distinctive Jewish character and vocation, as we absorb the myriad non-Jewish influences of American civilization?

We asked our writers to help us negotiate the complexity of these challenges and opportunities. We asked for essays addressing boundary-questions in the areas of *membership* (Who is a Jew? Who can participate?), *ideology* (What religious ideas and practices can be integrated into Judaism, and which cannot?) and *decision-making* (Who decides? On the basis of what authority?). We are aware that this structure left many important boundary issues untouched and open for future treatment in these pages.

These essays speak to one another in many complex and interesting ways. Some of the essays are in explicit dialectical tension with one another; others offer new theoretical frameworks or data that challenge how we think about the issues before us. Many of the writers stress the centrality of Jewish peoplehood, but several question fundamental assumptions about how we define our categories. Boundary-pushing dominates among those writers who describe ways they have met and embraced the other, without sacrificing Jewish integrity, but among this group too, we find a respect for the necessity of marking boundaries.

How do we decide the boundary issues before us on a case-by-case basis? This issue offers several characterizations of Reconstructionist decision-making, including systems-theory and case studies. Our definition of ourselves as post-

halakhic is also challenged by the two essays explicitly addressing themselves to the nature of halakhah. Underlying all these debates is an urgency of caring about the future of the Jewish people, the forms it evolves, and a sensitivity to the issues raised by our participation in a multi-cultural world.

About Future Issues

Our Spring 1995 issue will be devoted to the theme of “Building Community,” coinciding with the year-long study of that topic by FRCH congregations. Our Fall 1995 issue will examine the enduring legacy of Mordecai Kaplan, focusing on the ways in which his work continues to be a resource for our ongoing reconstruction of Judaism.

The first issue in our new format has been used for adult study both by FRCH congregations and in the curriculum of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College. Please keep the editor informed of such uses of the magazine. We are pleased to be providing a forum for that ongoing discussion. Subscription information can be found on the inside front cover.

Flexible Boundaries

BY JACOB J. STAUB

Every time I recite the *Aleynu* and, following Reconstructionist tradition, choose not to praise God for not having made Jews like all other peoples of the Earth, I am reminded of the importance of boundaries. Other Jews define themselves as different—specially chosen from—everyone else. I define myself over and against those other Jews; I am a Jew who does not claim to have been chosen from among all other peoples.

All boundaries and distinctions, anthropologists tell us, are cultural impositions upon an unbounded reality. All boundaries are drawn by ignoring the ambiguities that inhere in every context. Not all Jews are alike. Some Jews share more in common with certain non-Jews than they do with one another. We are not all genetically identical. We have never been theologically homogeneous. We don't eat the same foods, speak the same language, wear the same clothes, share the same values, read the same books the same ways.¹

All of these concrete, contextual differences, however, are ignored by our definitions of who is a Jew. The process of defining, of categorizing,

assumes that certain differences are less important than others. Before I proceed further, therefore, I want to keep in front of me two concrete images, touchstones by which our theories may be measured.

Snapshot #1.

Sam was raised in a non-observant, unaffiliated Jewish home. He grew up “enlightened,” and was allowed the choice not to become a *bar mitzvah*, because religion, he had come to believe, is hypocritical. Marie was raised as a Catholic in Central Africa. When she first met Sam in New York, she knew little English and next to nothing about Judaism. When they decided to get married, Sam surprised his family and himself by discovering that he wanted his children to be Jews. Neither of them thought it made any sense for Marie to convert, but she was willing to raise her children as Jews. They enrolled in the demanding thirty-week Derekh Torah program in New York, where both of them were introduced to Jewish belief and practice for the first time. They did not think of their wedding as Jewish and instead carefully constructed a moving ceremony that ran on two parallel

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tracks—folk African and folk Jewish—led by two friends, with a JP entering at the end to make the legal pronouncement.

When their two children were born, the son had a berit milah and the daughter had a covenantal naming ceremony. Their son attends a JCC nursery school. Marie bakes *hallah* every Shabbat and they sing *Shalom Aleykhem* and the Hebrew blessings over wine and bread. Sam takes the kids to synagogue from time to time, mostly on Jewish holidays. Last year, they invited their friends to their home and did a meaningful Seder. Recently, Sam and Marie have adopted three of her sister's orphaned children. The seven of them now sing *Shalom Aleykhem* together, and she takes the three new family members to church from time to time.

Snapshot #2

Al and Leona were confused. He lived in Israel for several years long ago, but has been estranged from the Jewish community for two decades. Leona is a practicing Catholic, but she has a deep respect for Al's recently rediscovered attachment to Judaism. Committed to raising Jewish children, she attends Shabbat services and studies Judaism with Al each week. She has been learning to read Hebrew so that she can be more comfortable in synagogue. As their wedding date approached, they made plans to go to Israel on their honeymoon.

And they wanted an *aufbruch*—to be called to the Torah for an aliyah on

the Shabbat before their wedding. They had found a welcoming, progressive congregation where they had been warmly embraced and which reconstructed much of traditional Jewish practice. They were to be married by a rabbi, had carefully chosen a *ketubah* text, and saw themselves as setting up a Jewish home.

So they were surprised to find that they couldn't have a joint aliyah because she is not Jewish. They are completely uninterested in offending anyone and are grateful that he will be called alone to the Torah, but no one has been able to explain adequately how this coincides with the depth and sincerity of their welcome into the community until now and, presumably, after the wedding.

I describe these two snapshots because they are typical. The details will vary, but all of us know about similar anecdotes. If they are atypical at all, it is in the strong commitment held in both cases to building a Jewish home and raising Jewish children. In both instances, estranged Jewish men have moved back into the Jewish orbit as a result of their relationships with non-Jewish women. One can only speculate about how their Jewish identities would have been affected had they chosen Jewish partners.

So—the Jewish community should rejoice. In Reconstructionist circles, we do our best to be welcoming. We recognize the children as Jews if they are raised as Jews. We invite the families to our homes for Shabbat meals. We recognize the demographics of North American Jewry and seek to be

inclusive so as to maximize the chances that they will grow increasingly involved in the Jewish community.

But is it really all right to rejoice as much at an intermarriage as at a marriage between two Jews? Don't we want to maintain a *distinction* between the two? And why is it so difficult for the intermarried to understand that despite our *social* embrace of them both, some *rituals* are inappropriate for someone who is not Jewish?

What follows is an attempt to explore the boundary issues that are raised in such cases.

Laying Out the Issues

I. Boundaries are essential. Every community exists by virtue of the distinctions that its members share and by which they are acculturated to its common identity. The very words of its language create distinctions about what is important and what is not. Some behaviors are laudable and some despicable. Some things are beautiful and others ugly. All cultures make such distinctions; they just draw the lines in different places. Even groups that profess to be pluralistic have their limits.

II. Reconstructionists believe that Judaism is based on group feeling. Judaism, taught Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan, is the evolving civilization of the Jewish *people*. Judaism does not exist apart from flourishing Jewish communities whose members' lives embody, individually and communally, a vital weave of Jewish practice, celebration, study, ethical and political involvement, artistic expression, and

even conflict—all in a Jewish context, arising out of a serious struggle with Jewish values and sources. Without such community, we will neither survive, nor continue to evolve.

Communities are formed by groups. Groups are sustained by the distinctions their members hold in common about what is good, worthwhile, ethical, rewarding, pleasurable, interesting. Ergo, a Judaism without boundaries, according to Reconstructionist theory, is a Judaism short-lived.

III. Boundaries are uncomfortable. As Reconstructionists, we feel that absolute distinctions are simple-minded. They ignore subtlety, and we value subtlety. We wouldn't generalize about Democrats or African-Americans or Presbyterians, and we aren't very happy about generalizing about what makes a person Jewish. We know too much about the variety of Jews in the past and in the present.

The Nature of Ritual

IV. Ritual distinctions are difficult. Rituals, we know, are culturally-conditioned expressions that symbolize our collective values. When they are seen only as that, however, there is a powerful temptation to dismiss them as "merely ritualistic," or "only symbolic."

If all religious traditions seek God, then why shouldn't a Jew explore the spiritual paths available at a Hindu meditation center? If conversion is meant to symbolize a person's transformation into a Jew, then why get picky about someone who has been

living as a Jew for years and never bothered to convert? Why should we celebrate marriages between two Jews, neither of whom cares about Judaism, and not celebrate at intermarriages in which both partners are excited about creating a Jewish home together?

V. Ritual distinctions are powerful.

For those of us who care about building communities, distinctions matter. It just doesn't work to call an intermarriage *kiddushin* and to treat it as a Jewish marriage. It feels offensive to have a non-Jew recite a Hebrew blessing at the Torah. Why? Because of something that I have never been able to explain adequately to my non-Jewish friends and colleagues. I feel a powerful tie to Jewish people across the globe whom I have never met, and not because I necessarily admire or even approve of the way they act or the values they hold. I feel a sense of shared destiny. We come, mythically, from common origins.

We may interpret Torah in ways that are unrecognizable to one another, or we may not care at all about interpreting Torah, but we are connected nevertheless. And there is something sacred, *kadosh*, about that connection—a sanctity that resides most palpably in ritual objects and ritual acts. And it feels to me like a violation of that sacred connection when a non-Jew acts ritually as if he or she is a Jew.

Not coincidentally, the root meaning of the Hebrew word *kedushah* has to do with setting aside, with making distinctions. It has nothing whatever to do with whether I like a non-Jewish

person, or with whether I “approve” of an intermarriage, as if it were for me to approve. It has to do with whether one has cast fully one's lot with the Jewish people, with whether one has joined our community.

Changing Boundaries

VI. Changing boundaries is necessary, but not to be done lightly. Affirming the necessity and power of boundaries, regrettably, is just the beginning. In our imperative to shape the ongoing evolution of Jewish civilization, Reconstructionists have already reconstructed inherited Jewish boundaries with regard to the roles of Jewish women and of Jewish gay men and lesbians. We have reconstructed the words of a liturgy that I am calling sacred and dare to sing our new words to traditional melodies. To more traditional Jews, it may seem indeed as if we recognize no boundaries.

If boundaries are ever-changing, if they were not revealed in immutable form at Sinai, can they still work effectively to sustain us as a group? How do they retain their power if we self-consciously tamper with them? Here it is useful to return to the master—to Rabbi Kaplan's ever-illuminating discussion of the process of revaluation in the first pages of *The Meaning of God in Modern Jewish Religion*. In the past, he teaches, the evolution of Judaism occurred unconsciously. Beliefs and practices changed, but the changes were not acknowledged. Jews really believed that their innovations—responses to changing social trends, cultural influ-

ences—were nothing more than accurate interpretations of what the Torah originally taught.

Today, he explained, we are not so unconscious. For better or worse, we possess a historical consciousness that enables us to discern and admit—even to applaud—the fact that our traditions have always evolved. Given that awareness, our challenge is to ensure that Judaism remain vital by giving voice to our most cherished values. Faced with any belief, ethical teaching, or ritual practice, we seek to understand its meaning and value as it was expressed in the idiom of previous generations. When we do so, we learn a great deal about the meaning of life that, reinterpreted in our own idiom, can enrich our lives. In those instances, the treasures of our heritage are a great gift to those who embrace them, and ritual practice can be transformative.

Often enough, however, parts of our heritage are morally objectionable. We do not believe in these cases that our ancestors, limited by their historical context, understood divine wisdom clearly, and we don't feel bound by their limitations. We object, for example, to the gender-based distinctions that they made and to their wrong-headed attitudes towards slavery and hierarchical authority. The distinctions they made between Jews and non-Jews do not correspond to our experiences in Western, democratic societies.

In such cases, Rabbi Kaplan taught, it is our sacred duty to innovate. Our changes should be based on

a deep knowledge and serious consideration of inherited teachings. But contrary to much popular opinion, Judaism has survived not because it has remained unchanging but because it *has* evolved, incorporating new ideas, values, and practices in every generation.

A Brief History

What can we learn about how to approach today's boundary issues from a study of our ancestors' attempts to define the boundaries of the Jewish group? What follows is a very brief sketch of the work of Shaye J. D. Cohen on the origins of the matrilineal principle in *halakhah*.² Cohen, a historian of rabbinic Judaism, concludes that throughout the biblical period, Jewish identity was transmitted patrilineally, by a Jewish father, and that the rabbinic innovation of matrilineality occurred in the second century c.e. and was not fully refined until the fourth century.

What led to this change? Cohen considers all of the various theories advanced and favors the following explanations:

1. The influence of Roman law. Mishnah *Kiddushin* 3:12, where the child of a gentile woman is for the first time declared to be a gentile, coincides historically and mirrors in its language and legal conceptualization contemporary Roman law codes about legal and illegal marriage and the status of children in each case. *From this, we learn about the necessity of responding to external socio-political influences.*

2. The rabbis' focus on forbidden mixtures. Following the analysis of Jacob Neusner,³ Cohen presents the rabbis' matrilineal innovation as part of the general thrust of rabbinic thought to categorize in order to create a well-ordered society on Earth. Within this framework, the older, patrilineal system was viewed as not drawing its lines with sufficient clarity. Relying on cultural assimilation, a non-Jewish woman was assumed to adopt the religion of her husband's house and community gradually, with no clear-cut demarcation of her transformed identity. The rabbinic categorizers required more for their construction of order, and matrilineal descent provided an unambiguous definition of the mother's Jewishness, constructed by analogy with their definition of animal cross-breeding. For them, Jews and gentiles were, in some sense, of different species. *I do not want to base our practice on anything like their analogy.*

3. The introduction of religious conversion for women. Until the first century, men could choose to become part of the Jewish people through ritual circumcision. Women joined the Jewish people by marrying Jewish men and thereby were incorporated into the community. The introduction of ritual immersion as a conversion ritual occurred around the time of the destruction of the Second Temple and the breakdown of cohesive Israel-based communities. As a consequence, women could choose to convert and laws could be enacted to encourage them to do so. *This exam-*

ple reminds us to attend to the changes in gender roles in our own day.

Some would argue that we ought not tamper with the rabbis' strategy, which did, after all, preserve Jewish identity at a time of crisis. The Reconstructionist movement, by contrast, has learned a different lesson, namely, that principles of Jewish descent have been modified before in response to changing social circumstances and that we should continue to do so today.

Flexing the Boundaries

Having first affirmed the principle of patrilineal as well as matrilineal descent in 1968 and having reaffirmed it several times since, we Reconstructionists might now move in several different directions: 1.) we could renounce that affirmation by way of re-asserting the need for clearer, more well-defined boundaries; 2.) we could embrace absolutely the principle of inclusiveness, ignoring all distinctions and accepting, on their own terms, all those who choose to call themselves Jewish; or 3.) we could affirm the sanctity of boundaries, even as we follow in the tradition of altering exactly where they are set in response to the realities of our era.

I am arguing for the third alternative. On the one hand, I feel deeply the sanctity of distinctions we hold between Jew and non-Jew, between what is Jewish and what is not. I also believe that the sacred power of ritual distinctions, when affirmed by communities, is not diminished by making those boundaries more permeable.

Our definitions of what is Jewish has changed perpetually over the course of Jewish history and will continue to change. That is the fate of all living cultures that do not self-destruct by adopting overly defensive stances in times of crisis.

On the other hand, we approach the twenty-first century facing the prospect that the two snapshots presented above will become ever more common. There is no realistic hope that the rate of intermarriage in North America will soon decrease, and we who care about Jewish demographic continuity therefore have to hope that such intermarriages, in which Judaism is affirmed, become more commonplace. To meet the challenges they pose, our communities will continue to be stretched to find ever new ways—including new ritual ways—to embrace our non-Jewish in-laws without eradicating the distinction between Jews and non-Jews.

We are not the only ones with access to God, but the Jewish way is distinct from other ways. Perhaps in the messianic era we will all join together. In the interim, however, the sanctification of life to which we aspire depends on maintaining our specific distinctiveness. ♦

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1. For an illuminating summary of the social scientific literature on this subject, see Eviatar Zerubavel, *The Fine Line: Making Distinctions in Everyday Life* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1991).
 2. See "The Origins of the Matrilineal Principle in Rabbinic Law," in *AJS Review* 10,1 (Spring 1985): 19-53; "The Matrilineal Principle in Historical Perspective," *Judaism* 34,1 (Winter 1985): 5-13; and "Conversion to Judaism in Historical Perspective: From Biblical Israel to Postbiblical Judaism," *Conservative Judaism* 36,4 (Summer 1983): 31-45. See also my article, "A Reconstructionist View on Patrilineal Descent," *Judaism* 34,1 (Winter 1985): 97-106.
 3. See, for example, Jacob Neusner, *Judaism: The Evidence of the Mishnah* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 256-270.

Jewish Boundaries and American Openness

BY HERB LEVINE

My wife and teen-age daughter are co-authoring a book of short stories about the problems faced by contemporary Jewish teens. For a story that focuses on inter-dating, my daughter suggested the following plot element: the Jewish heroine sneaks out of the house to pursue what has been forbidden her—dating a non-Jewish boy. When they meet at a local hangout and he orders a pepperoni pizza, she realizes she can't go any further with the date. She can socialize with this non-Jew, perhaps even be romantically inclined toward him, but the pepperoni pizza is too much. It represents a line she just can't bring herself to cross, a taboo that reminds her that she is a loyal Jew.

This story illustrates the power that inculcating Jewish boundaries can have in shaping our identities. Our concern for boundaries makes Jewish life distinctive and substantial, communicable not as abstraction, but as deeply engrained, lived experience.

No cultural group can long survive without a boundary that defines who or what is inside and who or what is

outside. Such boundaries are not facts of nature, but rather, are socially constructed and maintained by human cultural practices and symbolic representations, such as are fostered by religions and governments. Those representations and the boundaries they make possible vary in their strength from culture to culture and within a given culture. But one fact about cultural boundaries is universally acknowledged: the more a group feels itself threatened from without, the tighter it draws the boundaries around itself.¹ Boundaries demarcate the limits of what is known, safe, home, while marking the outside as alien, other. Often such boundary rules focus around issues of food and sexuality: what can be eaten and who can be married are not just Jewish obsessions, but, as British anthropologist Mary Douglas has shown, concerns shared by tribal cultures around the world.²

Ancient Boundaries

Writing about ancient Israel, Douglas stresses how much that society felt itself to be at risk as a small monotheist nation in a sea of polythe-

Dr. Herb Levine is editor of this magazine. His book, *Sing Unto God a New Song: A Contemporary Reading of the Psalms*, is forthcoming in Spring, 1995 from Indiana University Press.

ist neighbors.³ The great national sin throughout the Hebrew Bible is worship of foreign gods, some of them brought in by the foreign wives of Judean and Israelite kings, some of them connected to pockets of indigenous peoples remaining in the land after the Israelite conquest. On his return from Babylon, the priest Ezra, the disseminator (and perhaps editor) of the Torah, found in Judea a tremendous amount of intermarriage, both on the part of those who had stayed and those who had earlier returned from exile with foreign wives. One of his most significant and dramatic acts was to mandate that all men with foreign wives divorce them and expel their children (Ezra 10: 3-5). We cannot know the degree to which this plan was carried out, but its prominence in the narrative of Ezra indicates how very threatened was Israel's identity in the early post-exilic period. If this was indeed the period in which the Torah took its final form, as most scholars think, then it is little wonder that the boundary issues of maintaining a distinctive Israelite identity and theology should so thoroughly permeate the Torah traditions.⁴ Of central concern are not only political boundaries, but also social and bodily ones that could be maintained by pollution rules. The priestly legislation of Leviticus sets forth purity rules with numerous applications of the basic dichotomy, pure or impure, clean or unclean, into which the laws of *kashrut* fall.

What the individual body eats reflects the fundamental concerns of

the social body, because the body, as Douglas and other anthropologists have shown us, symbolizes society in microcosm. Douglas draws analogies between what is permitted for the table and what is permitted for the altar; unblemished animals of permitted species are offered by unblemished priests of permitted lineage. One sort of boundary points to another that is homologous with it. "The perfect physical specimens point to the perfectly bounded temple, altar, and sanctuary. And these in their turn point to the hard-won and hard-to-defend territorial boundaries of the Promised Land...Israel is the boundary that all the other boundaries celebrate and that gives them their historic load of meaning."⁵ In other words, the meaning of a particular practice, such as *kashrut*, cannot be separated from its function in maintaining the separateness and integrity of the people Israel.⁶ I find it striking that while ancient Israel's neighbors had complex codes of justice and morality, none of them, from what we know of their surviving texts, had dietary prohibitions remotely resembling those of Israel, since none of them were as concerned about retaining their separate identity as a people set apart for a holy purpose.

It is just such boundary-maintaining rules that have been most under attack in the liberal movements of Judaism since the Napoleonic Emancipation allowed us Jews to enter the portals of Western (read: Christian) civilization. Concern for what the Christians might think has been cen-

tral in many Jews' shedding of distinctive cultural practices, practices which for centuries had served to strengthen boundaries against social and sexual intercourse with Christians. In the Reform movement's current commentary to the Torah, we read: "Many Christians resented the unwillingness of Jews to eat in Christian homes. The desire to break down such barriers was one of the considerations that led the founders of the Reform movement to rethink the question of dietary observance."⁷

What Will the Gentiles Think?

We can see similar concerns in Mordecai Kaplan's promotion of a flexible attitude toward the traditional dietary laws. In suggesting that the main purpose of such practices is "to add Jewish atmosphere to the home," Kaplan argued that "there is no reason for suffering the inconvenience and self-deprivation which results from a rigid adherence outside the home." The Jew should therefore feel free "to eat freely in the house of a Gentile, and to refrain from eating trefa in the house of a fellow-Jew."⁸

Expressed in this double standard, we find Kaplan's ambivalence about Jewish boundaries vis-à-vis American civilization. Jews can and should maintain their own cultural practices with one another as distinctive folkways that are constitutive of their peoplehood, but when with outsiders, they should accommodate the majority culture. A century and a half of Jewish accommodationist thinking

lies behind Kaplan's view. As Moses Mendelssohn argued at the dawn of Jewish modernity, in eighteenth-century Germany, Jews should be Jews at home, and Germans in the street. With such a double standard as Kaplan proposes, "dietary practices would no longer foster the aloofness of the Jew, which, however, justified in the past, is totally unwarranted in our day."⁹

With respect to the non-Jew, it would seem that Kaplan did not see Jewish "aloofness" as neutral, but rather as something that might give offense. Sociologist though he was, Kaplan was not willing to affirm boundary-maintaining devices for their own sake. "If Judaism is inherently so weak that it requires the artificial barriers of social aloofness fostered by dietary laws for its maintenance, the very need for maintaining it is gone."¹⁰

Though he was deeply engaged in strategies for perpetuating the Jewish people, Kaplan was willing to limit the demands of *kashrut* to every meal in which the Jew was at home, or in another Jew's home, where intra-Jewish bonds could be strengthened through dietary regulations. If Kaplan had a concern that this double standard might lead a generation raised upon it to abandon Jewish dietary regulations altogether, he did not express it. What was most important with respect to the larger non-Jewish world was that the Jew should by no means "forego opportunities to enlarge the scope of his usefulness."¹¹

America, Land without Boundaries

Kaplan's ambivalence about rigid social boundaries reflects a deeply-held American attitude, which we have come to understand in the image of America as "melting pot," an idea as old as the Republic itself.¹² Americans are the people who, in embracing immigrants from around the world, created a new universal breed, so the myth goes. American society is open to all comers, to all who are willing to submerge their ethnic identity in the larger identity of Americanness.

Here is a Jewish version of the idea from early in this century, in the mouth of a character from Israel Zangwill's play, *The Melting-Pot*.

America is God's crucible, the great Melting-Pot where all the races of Europe are melting and re-forming! Here you stand, good folk, think I, when I see them at Ellis Island, here you stand in your fifty groups, with your fifty languages and histories, and your fifty blood hatreds and rivalries. But you won't be long like that, brothers, for these fires of God you've come to—these are the fires of God. A fig for your feuds and vendettas! Germans and Frenchmen, Irishmen and English men, Jews and Russians—into the Crucible with you all! God is making the American.¹³

No longer are the Jews seen as the chosen people, because America is now the nation chosen to fulfill God's universal purpose: weakening and

even erasure of ethnic boundaries. Along with every other people of the world, Jews are relegated to their narrow particularism; only the new breed of Americans is capable of embodying the universalist vision of salvation. Remember President Wilson's platform of "making the world safe for democracy," on the basis of which we entered into World War I! Kaplan did not reject Jewish chosenness in an intellectual vacuum. He did so in the midst of an American civilization that had then and still has a powerful competing myth of national chosenness.

Kaplan's reconstructed version of American Judaism proudly chose to face that larger world of America and its universalist values. Practices that solidified the Jewish community from within were all for the good, but insofar as those same practices prevented Jews from playing their part in the scheme of universal salvation which mattered to America, they were to be sacrificed on the altar of flexibility and accommodation.

Two Civilizations or One?

Kaplan's double standard for kashrut provides a perfect example of his attempt to balance the values of living in two civilizations. As someone who was raised with a version of Kaplan's double standard, I understand well how it enabled my family's participation in the cultural life of America, without sacrificing our sense of Jewish distinctiveness. There came a point, however, at which I chose a single standard, when I wanted to live as a Jew at home and on the street. Liv-

ing in the most open society the world has ever known, American Jews have generally not made the same choice. We liberal Jews have largely abandoned *kashrut*, both inside and outside the home, along with most other distinctively Jewish folkways, choosing rather the weak social and ethnic boundaries that are such a prominent feature of American life. I do not doubt that many have made those decisions with considerable care; most, however, have drifted into non-observance either in rebellion against the norms of their boundary-conscious parents, or because they have no experience of *kashrut*. Most Jews have never been trained to respect such a boundary-maintaining practice as contributing to the survival or collective well-being of the Jewish people.

The Jewish people in America is endangered, to my mind, by its propensity to embrace America's boundarilessness. The fifty-two percent intermarriage rate reported by the National Jewish Population Survey of 1990 is eloquent testimony to this danger. I do not pretend that wider observance of *kashrut* will solve the Jewish demographic crisis, though the taboos of *kashrut* clearly offer a powerful, time-honored bulwark for Jewish identity. On a personal level, I do not assume just because my daughter at age thirteen finds pepperoni pizza to be beyond the pale that her ingrained sense of Jewish boundaries will necessarily guide her toward the selection of a Jewish partner. All I can claim for *kashrut* is that because it runs so much against the grain of

American life, it anchors us outside the mainstream culture. Having a set of externally-defined rules for what we can and cannot eat constrains our freedom as Americans to do whatever we want, whenever we want (including marrying whomever we want), just as a discipline of Shabbat observance does. In choosing to constrain our individualism through observance of *kashrut*, we are opting for a communally-defined existence: we enjoy the fullest possible diet only with other *kashrut*-observing Jews.

Though we speak of living in two civilizations, we are far more at home in America than in Judaism, which, for many of us, is often a set of disembodied teachings, rather than a rich tapestry of life. One of the lessons of Reconstructionism has always been that Judaism's teachings cannot be separated from the cultural practices that embody them. I encourage us to resist the suburban homogenization that we have chosen for ourselves through whatever means we can—whether these be Jewish arts, Jewish eating, Jewish ethics, Jewish family life, Jewish neighborhoods, or Jewish worship.

In the McDonaldization of world culture that we are currently experiencing, there is an important role for Jewish distinctiveness. For we have learned through our long history a lesson valuable to the whole world: how to remain a separate people, yet convey through our way of life a universal theological idea, which continually implants in us a yearning for a universal redemption for our planet and all

its living creatures. Can we hold on to that universalism without our particularism? Not if we expect to remain a people, rather than just a collection of atomized Americans. ♦

1. This is the thesis of Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An analysis of the concepts of pollution and taboo* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966).
2. Mary Douglas, "Deciphering a Meal," in *Implicit Meanings: Essays in Anthropology* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975), 262.
3. Douglas, (1975), 269.
4. Mary Douglas, *In the Wilderness; The Doctrine of Defilement in the Book of Numbers*, JSOT Supplement Series 158 (Sheffield, Eng.: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), notes that the priestly writers of the Torah did not choose to make contact with foreigners defiling, which suggests their distance from the more xenophobic concerns of Ezra and the government party.
5. Douglas (1975), 269.
6. Her functional reading is to be contrasted with Douglas (1966), 54-57, which stresses *kashrut's* cosmological analogies with Gen. 1, and with her recent article, "Holy Joy: Rereading Leviticus: The Anthropologist and the Believer," *Conservative Judaism* 46 (Summer, 1994): 3-14, which stresses analogies with prophetic and priestly ethics. While

there is clearly an ethical dimension to rabbinic laws regarding animal slaughter, finding ethics in biblical *kashrut* must inevitably seem apologetic. In our age, when there is an increasing sensitivity to animal rights and suffering, which has led many to vegetarianism, the only fully ethical dietary prohibition would be one that prevented the taking of any animal life.

7. Bernard Bamberger, "The Dietary Laws" in W. Gunther Plaut, ed., *The Torah: A Modern Commentary* (New York: Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1981), 811.
8. Moredecai M. Kaplan, *Judaism as a Civilization: Toward a Reconstruction of American-Jewish Life* (1934; rpt. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1981), 441.
9. Kaplan, 441.
10. Kaplan, 441.
11. Kaplan, 442.
12. Nathan Glazer and Daniel Patrick Moynihan, *Beyond the Melting Pot: The Negroes, Puerto Ricans, Jews, Italians, and Irish of New York City* (Cambridge: M.I.T. Press and Harvard University Press, 1963), 290, cite Hector St. Jean de Crevecoeur, from *Letters of an American Farmer* (1782): "Here individuals of all nations are melted into a new race of men."
13. Israel Zangwill, *The Melting-Pot: Drama in Four Acts* (New York: Macmillan, 1909), 37.

The Boundariless Universe

BY RAMI SHAPIRO

In Ilse Aichinger's short story, "The Bound Man," we are fascinated by the agility of the sideshow star who, bound by ropes that would strangle most of us, manages to accomplish amazing feats of dexterity. There is nothing he cannot do. Yet when cut free by the story's protagonist, the Bound Man dies, suddenly incapable of even the most simple acts of self-preservation. The story reveals the power of boundaries: boundaries give us life, self, definition. Without them we are nothing. Boundaries are part of the fullness that is Life, but only a part. Boundaries are vital to the relative world, the world of independent selves, separate things, I's and thou's. But the absolute world--the whole that encompasses the parts, the world that is our spiritual essence--knows no boundaries, no separate selves, no things. In the world of the absolute, there is only a seamless unity.

IBM made a short film about this boundariless universe, called "Powers of Ten." In the film we watch a couple picnic in an open field. The camera focuses directly above them, keeping the couple framed in the center of its field of vision. It then backs away in increments of ten: 10 meters, 100

meters, 1000 meters, etc. We watch the couple recede as the planet comes into full view. We watch the planet join the dance of the solar system and the solar system swirl with the Milky Way. Back and back and back to the farthest reaches of our imagination. We know the couple is at the center of our frame but the boundaries extend to infinity, and there is nothing but the vast emptiness of space swallowing our picnickers as they swallow their sandwiches.

Then the direction reverses. The camera moves toward the pair in increments of ten. Soon the earth returns, and the field, and our picnicking couple. The camera continues to move in, focusing on the hand of the young man. The hand fades to epidermis, then to the cellular patterns of the skin, then to the molecular level, then to atoms, then to the swirl of electrons around nuclei, then to the vast emptiness within, balancing the vast emptiness without.

You and I and all things exist at the tension point between these two infinities. Better still: you and I are the tension point between these two infinities. We imagine that tension, invest it with self and ego, with dreams and drama. We insist that the

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emptiness within and the emptiness without are not real. We are real, and we create boundaries to prove it. We pretend that only the relative is real. Yet Reality is otherwise: the relative and the absolute are themselves part of each other and a greater whole we call God.

The Relative and Absolute Worlds

The relative and the absolute arise together, each necessitating the other. When I focus on figure rather than ground, I see "me," "us," "you" and "them." When I focus on ground rather than figure, I lose the sense of "I" and become aware of the whole without being aware I am aware; there is a knowing that has no knower.

Boundaries are essential to the relative world. They arise naturally as the ego develops. While all sentient beings have some sense of self and boundary, only the human being makes boundaries sacred. We draw a line in the sand and call our side the Holy Land, the Father Land, the Mother Land, Middle Earth, Land of the Rising Sun. We draw a line around our tribe or clan and call it Chosen. We draw a line around inherited practice and ideas and call it Revelation. We draw a line and then pretend to the death we didn't do it: God did.

We cannot abide our own need for boundaries, so we invent a bound God to draw our boundaries for us. We refuse to recognize that boundaries only make sense in the relative world, and that the relative world is not the whole of Reality. We are so cut

off from any awareness of the boundariless that we have allowed ourselves to be reduced in our own minds to our own minds. We define ourselves through the narrow confines of egocentrism, and ego is nothing without boundaries. Like the Bound Man, without knots, I am not.

The individual lives only to the extent that the boundaries between the I and the not-I are secure. A people lives only to the extent that the boundaries between Us and Them are guarded. To be me, I must not be you. To be us, we must never be them. All conflict—social, psychological, political—arises from this division, as does fear. All love is corrupted by boundaries, for boundaries breed fear, and fear precludes love. And all of this process is natural. We do not choose to draw boundaries, only where we draw them. The problem is not with our natural tendency to draw boundaries, but with our lost ability to transcend them.

Our First Boundaries

The first thing the first person does in the Garden of Eden is name the others, and thereby set boundaries: "This is not me." Torah shows brilliant insight here, for the unexpected result of this naming is loneliness. We set ourselves apart only to find ourselves alone and lonely. We name and create boundaries, and then try to breach them to overcome loneliness.

As Torah so dramatically teaches, sex is the way most of us seek to breach the boundary between self and other. There is a moment of extreme

sexual passion when I and Thou disappear. There is a moment of selfless knowing where an intimation of unity is found. Perhaps this is why our ancestors referred to sexual intercourse as *lada'at*, to know. What is it we know? Not the other, for at that moment there is no self or other. What we know is the boundariless world of absolute unity. It is this knowing that leads mystics of every tradition to couch their insights in sexual images and create sexual yogas, Hindu, Buddhist, Taoist and Jewish. It is this knowing that we desire above all other, for it is this knowing that is the key to salvation, the transcending of boundaries and awakening to the absolute.

Sex and religion may be seen as alternative means to overcome a common problem: the isolation of the bound human being. From the moment we establish clear boundaries between self and other, we seek to transcend those boundaries through love. Both physical love and spiritual love reach their highest expression in moments of selflessness. It is this selflessness that we desire, for only there can we find salvation.

Salvation is not human fulfillment. Salvation is letting go of the relative and opening to the absolute as the ground out of which one arises. When we know we are not separate selves, that we are not bounded by ego, that the self is but a temporary expression of a timeless, unbounded infinity, *then* we know the mystery of Life, and begin to live out our days with compassion, justice, humor and grace.

One who has tapped the absolute returns to the world of boundaries with a new sensitivity: not free from boundaries, but no longer taking them so seriously. Salvation takes us beyond the boundary-laden world of named things. Yet even naming is not our most subtle bond. The most subtle bond is the bond of thought.

The Known and The Unknown

Our thoughts define us. Thought is always of the past, of what is already known. We define ourselves retroactively. We cannot think the unknown. It is too immediate, too intimate. We cannot think the here and now, for even as we do, it is already there and then..

The unknown is the eternal present that thought cannot grasp. The unknown is the *Eyn Sof*, the Boundariless that is both whole and part, one and many, all and every, being, becoming, the *Was-Is-Will Be*. With great insight, Torah calls this boundariless whole, YHVH--rooted in the verb "to be." Torah had the insight to make this name unpronounceable, the Name that is Nameless.

The ultimate boundary between the Known and the Unknown, between Time and Eternity is thought. End thought, and we end the known. End thought, and we enter the unknown. End thought, and we cross into the timeless present that is the Nameless source and substance of all and nothing. Yet thought cannot be ended directly by the will, for willing itself is a kind of thought. Thought ends when we take thought

to its outermost boundary and then one step beyond, whether through sex, meditation, or liturgy.

Most of our thought is bound by language. We do not see the world as it is, but only as our language allows it to be. Again Torah is revealing: God spoke and the world came to be; language creates reality out of the primal chaos. To break free of the bonds of language is to reenter the chaos, to breach the boundaries of thought and end the self and the world it imagines: to die to the separateness of things and awake to the oneness beyond even the idea of oneness.

What Mysticism Teaches

Mystics have been teaching this for centuries. Chant the sacred text over and over until the meaning is lost in primal sound and the sound no longer informs. The word returns to noise, and then a silence arises from the noise, quieting it. A calm embraces all, and all gives way to nothing. There is a breach in the boundary, a space for unknowing. In that breach, enlightenment lies.

Abraham Abulafia, the thirteenth-century Spanish kabbalist, is among the greatest masters of this linguistic deconstruction. He knew: that the relative world is a linguistic construct, a pattern of known and named things; that the relative world rests in a greater world, the world of the absolute; that the known is but a finite slice of an infinite round. Therefore he instructed us to combine the sacred letters of the *alef-bet* in infinite patterns.

At first, the patterns bear conventional meanings, but in time all convention fades, reason gives way to intuition, intuition to imagination and eventually to stillness. The mind is quiet; thought ends; the known gives way to the unknown even as the knower gives way to....? Deconstruct the language, and you break the finite bonds of the known and cross the boundary into Truth.

Abulafia taught us to combine letters over and over again until they no longer made words, no longer made sense, no longer defined, no longer bound. Having loosened the knots of self, we slip into the Not of God.

Two Kinds of Liturgy

Liturgy can do the same thing: "can," not "will." There are two kinds of liturgical creations: those that set boundaries and those that breach them. Liturgies that set boundaries focus our attention on the past. The words themselves become holy. The sign becomes confused with that toward which it points. By contrast, liturgies that breach boundaries seek to open us to the present. The sign points beyond itself.

Both types of liturgy use tradition, staying within the inherited words and forms. The first type seeks to translate what was heard in the past, while the second seeks to transmit what is being heard in the present. The first is ordered, controlled and controllable. The second is anarchic, leaving itself open to surprise.

There is no surprise in liturgies that bind. That is why we love them.

They are comfortable, safe, welcoming. They define who we are, why we are, and why we are not other than we are. They make us special. Liturgies that breach, however, are dangerous. They begin with the safe and the known, and then push us into the terrifying and the unknown. They take us to the edge of our boundary and kick sand over the line. Not only the line between us and them, but the greater line between being and nothingness. They do this by planting seeds of subversion, by revealing a nuance to the text that the words themselves do not directly convey. By *transmitting* what the liturgist hears, rather than *translating* what the original text says.

There is an important difference between translation and transmission. Translation must remain true to the language of the text, transmission, only to its spirit. When a translator reads Kohelet's cry: *havel havalim!* she knows that the words mean "Vanity of vanities." But these words also mean breath. Kohelet says to me: "Breath, breath. Everything is breath: empty, transient, flowing!" I hear what the translator is not allowed to hear. The translator must be true to the past; I must be true only to what I hear: the Silence beyond thought.

The Silence, however, is not Jewish any more than it is Hindu or Christian. The Silence has no label, though I use Jewish names to reveal the wholly and holy Nameless. Who is to say Kohelet did not intend

"breath and emptiness" as well as "vanity"? Who is to say there is but one interpretation of a text? Certainly not our sages. Judaism is too old and too wise to submit itself to an orthodoxy. There may be one way to lay *tefilin* (though even here orthopraxy fails), but there certainly is no one way to understand what laying *tefilin* means. Judaism survives not in spite of its varied meanings, but because of them.

What Makes Creativity Jewish?

What makes my writing Jewish? Fundamentally it is this: I always begin by listening to an historically Jewish text. While I am eager to learn the multiform ways humankind binds itself from facing the emptiness of God, I draw my inspiration only from Jewish knots. When I write liturgy, I want to speak in an unhyphenated voice. I am not a feminist – humanist – buddhist – gay – sufi – lesbian – leftist – wicca – new age – posthalakhic – neohasidic – Jew. I am only myself. When I write, I do not consciously seek to expand the boundaries of my tradition. I am a Jew. I desire to be nothing else. I do not read into the words of my ancestors the ideas of my Gentile teachers: Buddha, Lao Tzu, Alan Watts, D.T. Suzuki, Dogen, Ralph Waldo Emerson, J. Krishnamurti. I simply listen to what I hear and write it down.

Here is a new hearing in process. The reader can compare my *Yedid Nefesh* with the translation in *Kol Haneshamah* (pp. 6, 8).

Yedid Nefesh

There is a hunger in me no thing
can fill.
A gnawing emptiness that calls forth
dreams
dark and unfathomable.
My soul is whispering;
Deep calling Deep,
and I know not how to respond.
The Beloved is near—
as near as my breath,
as close as my breathing—
The World Soul of which my soul
is but a sliver of light.
Run to it my love,
embrace the One who is me,
that I might embrace the others
who are One.
Enwrapped in Your Being
I am at peace with my becoming.
Engulfed in Your flame
all dross removed
I am clear and unclouded.
I am a window for the Light,
a lens by which You see Yourself;
a slight of Mind
that lets us know ourselves as You
and lets You know You as us.
How wondrous this love
that is Oneness beyond unity.

I am a scribe. I listen and I take notes. I believe I hear a true piece of what was intended. If what I hear and record is true—true in the sense that it works to point us toward the unnamed and nameless absolute—then it is worth keeping. If my words loose the knots that we might glimpse the Not, that is all I care about. My loyalty is not to what was, but to what works.

Remember that what works for one may not work for another, and, in the end, we all give our loyalty to what works for us. For some, a Native American Sweat Lodge is just a *shvitz*. Yet we are not so different that we run the risk of splitting into radically individuated denominations of one. Boundaries take care of themselves. They shift, they fade, they reappear.

I don't think we should worry overmuch about boundaries. We invent them and we will continue to invent them. We should worry more about being honest. I never seek to recast the words of Buddha. I leave that to Buddhists. I seek to listen to my ancestors and to share what I hear. If the one sometimes sounds like the other, it is because they are both speaking truth. ♦

An Open House

BY SHEFA GOLD

When I first entered Rabbinical school, I had a series of dreams which were an attempt at understanding Reconstructionism and my relationship to it. Here's one:

I am in a large old house which is Reconstructionism. There are all kinds of meetings happening downstairs. I go upstairs to find the bathroom. There is a big storm happening outside and the wind is whipping through the upstairs part of the house. All the leaders of Reconstructionism come run-

ning upstairs at that point, to survey the damage, so I show them the debris and dust that has blown in and I point to the door which is laying in the backyard. Their response surprises me. Instead of being upset, they just laugh, shrug their shoulders and say, "That's just like Reconstructionism—getting its doors and windows blown off..." And then they walk off laughing and reminiscing about other wind-related disasters, and I migrate to the back-yard.

I know the force of wind. A house that tries to seal itself tight against a hurricane or tornado might be torn from its foundations, while an open house might let the wind blow through and survive. Some believe you can catch Spirit, contain it safely in the Word, the Form, the Structures of Religion. One day, in a time of difficulty perhaps, they open wide their container and find only stale air.

An open house is different. The freshness of the air makes you want to breathe ever deeper. The varied fragrances wafting by stir the heart and encourage curiosity, passion, memories. The dust and pollen that has blown in through the open windows settles on the shapes within my own house that had become invisible to me. Suddenly I am

awakened to the beauty of my own home.

This has happened for me many times in my experience with other spiritual traditions. I will give here examples of times when my openness to practices of another tradition served to enrich and deepen my Jewish life. This process of cross-pollination has been dependent on two factors: a deep, unshakable sense of Jewish identity, and a willingness to experience another tradition wholeheartedly.

Native American Sweat Lodge

Fifteen years ago, I was invited to participate in a Sweat Lodge ceremony led by a man (Jewish by birth), who had undergone a serious and rigorous training with the Oglala Sioux tribe in South Dakota. The Sweat

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Lodge became for me a regular practice and I eventually received training to lead. In the Lodge, I learned the purposes and potentials of prayer. I learned the preciousness of all life and the fact of its inter-relatedness. The Sweat Lodge taught me the essential need for firm structure in prayer, which could provide an underlying sense of safety, allowing for the risks of inner expansion. The Sweat Lodge also taught me the importance of preparation for prayer and for the honing of intention. I learned what it meant to speak to God in my own language, and how to experience exaltation with humility. I learned to bridge the gap between the earthiness of my body and the abstracted holiness of my ideas and beliefs. In the Sweat Lodge, I learned the importance of “tribe,” and the ways in which my tribe might contribute to the whole of life.

A strange thing happened at my first Sweat. Ten of us, (all Jews without a living connection to Judaism), encircled the red hot glowing rocks in a dark womblike structure surrounded by deep snow. In the third hour of chanting and prayer, the lodge became so hot that I thought I would die. It wasn't a logical thought; it was an experience of the closeness and reality of death. At that moment, we began to chant the *Shema*. It seemed to come out of our mouths, unplanned, simultaneously, in one powerful voice. The sound of that *Shema* echoes through me till this day. That sound transformed each of us sitting in that dark enclosure. It

birthed a new awareness of how very deep my Jewish voice was buried, and how much beauty it contained.

Everything that I learned in the Sweat Lodge is relevant and of use to me as I approach my prayer-life as a Jew. As a rabbi, I search for teachings within my tradition that exemplify the truth of my experience in the Lodge. And in the wide and holy worlds of Jewish tradition, I find them. If I hadn't experienced the Sweat Lodge first, I wouldn't know what to look for.

Zhikr

The word *zhikr* means “remembrance” and is related to the Hebrew *zakhor*. The practice of *Zhikr* comes out of Sufism, the mystical teachings of Islam. It is a sacred technology that uses the sounds and rhythms of certain Arabic words and phrases to come into a state of remembrance of God. When I first experienced the power of *Zhikr*, it felt like “coming home.” In the training I received, I prepared for *Zhikr* for six months by practicing a series of *Wazifas*—chants that are designed to attune a person to the divine attributes corresponding to the ninety-nine names of God. Gradually, I learned to experience these qualities internally as well as “out there.” I learned to notice and respond to subtle sensations in my body and emotions—openings, blockages, yearnings, changes of texture. As the sensations within me became clearer, I became sensitive to the “group energy,” and learned techniques of responding to

it that might serve the needs of the group.

The phrase that is most often used in the practice of *Zhikr* is, *la illaha ila Allah*, which means literally, "There are no gods but God." As the practice deepens, the meaning expands. Through the practice of *Zhikr*, I became aware of how my forgetfulness of God's presence results in various kinds of idolatry—the worship of ideas, money, prestige, fixed images. In *Zhikr*, with each repetition, I turn away from those idolatries and turn towards the One. That "turning" can happen in so many different ways—gently or forcefully, with surrender or with the strength of will, through repulsion or attraction. It can come from unmasking our idolatries or from the awakening of ancient heart-yearnings.

Through *Zhikr* and other Sufi practices, my perceptions of Jewish liturgy were transformed. I began to search out powerful sacred phrases in the liturgy that might be explored through repetition, rhythm and melody, and used as vehicles for coming closer to God, for opening the heart, for awakening compassion, for remembering where I truly stand in relation to the Universe. And I began to explore Jewish texts that describe similar practices. The practice of *Wazifas* showed me that descriptions, praises and different names for God were never arbitrary. They could be utilized as passageways into deeper parts of ourselves, where the intersection of human and divine could be experienced firsthand.

The practice of *Zhikr* allowed me to explore the meaning and implications of God's Oneness. It awakened such passion in me that I can never again be content with bland religion, sentimental religion, or religion that engages the mind but excludes the body and the full range of my emotions. The process of "turning" that happens in *Zhikr* has shed new light on what it means to do *teshuvah*. It has awakened me to the subtleties that spiritual practices must express, if they are to develop and continue nourishing and refining our connection to God. The sensitivities developed in the practice of *Zhikr* have added new dimensions to what it means to lead or to serve, challenging me continually to fine-tune my perception of and responsiveness to the needs and potentials of my congregation.

I have no doubt that all of these teachings could have been found within a Jewish context. But they seem to be buried, and I am only now developing the tools to unearth them. What fuels my digging is the glorious experience of *Zhikr* and the desire to experience those treasures as a Jew.

Buddhist Meditation

Buddhism has developed a spiritual technology that has been refined over the last 2500 years. The practice of "Mindfulness," as exemplified in both meditation and in the way we live every moment of life, has given me a vantage point from which to know myself. When I sit in meditation, I learn to call on the fullness of my being in order to perceive the pre-

sent moment. The moment that I begin, the hindrances to my full participation in this moment arise. The mind begins its chatter about the past, about the future, reflections, speculations, jokes, judgments. I become acutely aware of each inner voice—its tone, volume, source, intention, and then I return my full attention to the “here” and “now.” I use the awareness of my breath to help me remember not to get caught and entangled by my thoughts and emotions. Over time, my awareness of the nature of the present moment expands. I learn that it is in the present moment where I want to live my life. My relationship to others improves, because I am available to respond directly to the situation at hand (and not only to my complex thoughts about it). I begin to recognize my inner voices, so that I may learn to discern which ones are voices of justification or wisdom, self-deception or prophecy.

My experience of Judaism has been enriched by this practice. When I say a blessing, I use it as an opportunity to enter into the holiness of this moment. The blessing becomes a practice of mindfulness, allowing me to experience the unique gift of this moment. Invoking the presence of God reminds me to be wholehearted in my action. When I experience the benefits that the practice of blessing brings when done with the intention of increasing my awareness and opening to the present, I wonder whether this was not after all the intention of my ancestors.

I experience Shabbat as a day of mindfulness, when habitual “doing” stops, and my sense of “being” expands. My mind rests from its plans and its worries, so that I can experience a renewed appreciation of the miracles present right now. In Buddhist practice, the inner training often concerns itself with developing the skill of “letting go.” I find that the ability to let go of my weekday concerns is essential to the practice of Shabbat. Jewish teachings may express the need for letting go of the week in order to move into Shabbat, but they do not often specify how that is done, nor do they fully acknowledge the obstacles that a grasping mind presents, as do Buddhist teachings and practice.

When Thich Nhat Hanh, a Vietnamese Buddhist monk was teaching a retreat during the High Holy Days last year, my husband and I were asked to be the rabbis for the Jewish participants. Beforehand we sent some Jewish literature to Thich Nhat Hanh so that he would have some understanding of what we were doing at his retreat. At the end of the retreat he spoke about what he had learned. “It is my understanding,” he said softly, in a tone of complete simplicity, “that the essence of Jewish tradition is doing everything in the presence of God. That is mindfulness.”

At the Thich Nhat Hanh retreat when we practiced walking meditation, I was reminded of the meaning of the word *halakhah*. In walking meditation we pay careful attention to how we walk so that each step express-

es our love, gentleness, compassion, and commitment. Each step is taken consciously. The essence, spirit and purpose of halakhah seems so often to get lost in the particulars. How good to be reminded that *halakhah* can be understood and can evolve in this spirit: as the discipline of learning how to walk more consciously in ways that affirm what we hold most precious.

Centering Prayer

In preparing to co-lead a workshop on “the Devotional Path,” I set out to research some Christian devotional practices, and discovered Centering Prayer. Centering is the renewal of a gentle, meditative process leading towards the contemplative experience of “resting in God.” The focus is on intention rather than concentration. A sacred word is used as a vehicle for remembering the intention of being with God in the silence. The sacred word is always the pointer and never the focus.

My first reaction was, “This is so simple. How can it possibly work?” My training was with forms of Jewish and Sufi meditation that require intense concentration and the ability to juggle visualization, sound, movement, and intention. Along with my doubting reaction, there was another response in me which immediately said, “yes.” What was being described was so very consistent with my own belief about the nearness of God, not just for the specially-gifted mystic, but for everyone. “It is not in Heaven that you should say, ‘Who shall go up to

heaven and bring it to us so that we can hear it and keep it?’ It is not over the sea that you should say ‘Who will cross the sea and get it for us so that we will be able to hear it and keep it?’ It is something that is very close to you. It is in your mouth and in your heart, so that you can keep it” (Deut. 30:12-14).

When I took on Centering as a daily practice, I was amazed at the immediate results. In the first few months, the simple act of opening to God seemed to unstop channels of divine love that flooded my life with its radiance. Gradually that flow of *hesed* slowed to a trickle and I was left with the moment-to-moment challenge of untangling myself from thoughts, growing my patience, remembering my love, renewing my commitment to gently let go of all content and fall deeper into the silence.

Through the practice of Centering, certain phrases from the Psalms have suddenly become clear to me. What does it mean to “take refuge in God” (Psalms 5:12, 7:2, 11:1, 16:1, 18:31, 25:20, 31:2, 34:9, 36:8, 37:40)? What does it mean to “wait for God” (Psalms 33:22, 37:7)? What does it mean to “quiet my soul” (Psalm 131:2)? I am also beginning to understand more fully the experience of *devekut*, described in the stories of hasidic masters, not as a strange and holy accomplishment of the rare saint, but as a state of consciousness available to all who are willing to merge love with discipline.

In my role as spiritual counselor, I am called on to facilitate others' cultivation of a relationship with God. (The Reconstructionist leanings against the "personhood" of God do not preclude the human need for relationship with the Source of our being). As in any relationship, it takes commitment and a certain amount of ongoing "quality" time. Intimacy develops gradually and in that process, you learn about yourself as well as the Other with whom you're involved. In my desire to know and love God, I come to know myself—the voice of wise guidance and the guile of self-justification, the tricks of the mind and the expanse of the heart.

Perhaps this experience of being intimately alone with God has been so delicious to me because it is the complement of Jewish practice, which seems to stress our communal relationship to our God. Centering Prayer addresses this imbalance and feeds a deep hunger.

Centering is not meant to take the place of prayer. Rather, it cultivates the ground from which a meaningful prayer life can grow. It has helped me to find the still center, the place where prayers are born.

An Open House

I want to honor this process of letting the radiance of another tradition shed light on my own. We live in an

extraordinary time when the deep teachings that were once hidden are being made available to anyone who comes to them with respect, humility and a sincere desire to take on the responsibilities of service that those teachings imply. I have learned that the cure for our own ailments can sometimes be found in someone else's medicine chest. We may be holding the cure that they are searching for as well.

Too often Judaism is taught by putting down other religions in comparison. That's how I learned, and it did not serve me at all. For when I later learned that I should love the stranger because I had also been a stranger in Egypt, my training in "put-down" Judaism prevented me from knowing the heart of the stranger, from respecting her path and feeling a kinship with her. It was only through opening to the spiritual practices and to the beauty of other religious paths that I was able to empathize with the stranger and let compassion grow inside me. In the process of opening to others, I became more my "self," and my own understanding and experience of Judaism has been enriched.

I return to an open house, bearing gifts for which I am profoundly grateful. I pause momentarily in the doorway to listen. Already I hear distant thunder as the winds gather strength. ♦

The Non-Jew in the Synagogue

BY MORDECHAI LIEBLING

Today all congregations face the question of the appropriate roles for the non-Jewish¹ partner of a member of the congregation. This is the hottest and most divisive issue in North American congregational life. The issues are particularly difficult for Reconstructionists, because we have placed peoplehood at the center of Judaism. Reconstructionists have always maintained that belonging is more central than *behaving* and *believing*. We have not wanted to exclude any Jews on the basis of their *beliefs*—Zionists, Socialists, Communists, anarchists, atheists. How can we exclude someone from certain aspects of communal life on the basis of beliefs—especially someone who has either made, or is willing to make, a commitment of *belonging* by joining the synagogue and agreeing to raise Jewish children?

In the Orthodox and Conservative movements, these questions are not decided by congregations, but by rabbinic authority based on *halakhah*. Through the lens of *halakhah*, the non-Jewish spouse may not be a member, have an *aliyah* or be a leader of the service. There is no halakhic

prohibition, however, on the ability of a non-Jew to attend services and say prayers. Within halakhic parameters, it might be possible for a gentile to lead a prayer that is not an obligatory part of the service. For example, the *sheheyanu* prayer at a *simcha* is not a mandatory prayer and might be said by a non-Jew, and responded to by Jews, even in a halakhically governed congregation.²

Without being able to depend on the authoritative decisions of *halakhah*, Reconstructionist and Reform congregations are faced with the decisions of which ritual and civic rights they will accord the non-Jewish spouse. I will focus here on how Reconstructionist congregations can come to a decision and what some of the criteria are that need to be considered.

We are a movement of study and process, with guidance and leadership provided by our rabbis. Being a participatory and democratic body, decision-making is not ceded to the rabbi. The Reconstructionist congregation studies *halakhah*, but *halakhah* is not determinative. The paradigmatic Reconstructionist process calls for

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study of traditional sources, a compilation of relevant values, both Jewish and secular, an examination of sociological and/or scientific data, and an analysis of the impact of each of the possible decisions on each of the affected parties. It also calls for a democratic, inclusionary process maximizing the number of people involved. Some congregations, in order to insure an educated decision, have stipulated that in order to take part in a final vote, one has to have attended a certain number of study/discussion sessions.

Emotional Lightning Rod

Intermarriage has affected the immediate families of the vast majority of Jews. Many Jews are disturbed by this trend and feel powerless to prevent it. The only place that many feel they can exercise some control over this issue is in the synagogue. For some who felt that they could not take a "hard line" in their own family or find a way to prevent it, they, "by golly," are going to do something in their synagogue. The particular issue of what the non-Jewish partner may or may not do in the synagogue becomes the symbol of all the problems of intermarriage. And *this time* they do have a voice and a vote. Thus, the synagogue discussions have become an emotional lightning rod and dumping ground for people's feelings about all issues relating to intermarriage.

For the intermarried couple or their supportive friends or family members, the discussions also have

symbolic value. They can be acting out anger at a Jewish community, which they feel has rejected them, whether the rejection came from the rabbi who refused to officiate at the wedding, the relatives who refused to attend, or the parents who were less than welcoming. They are often angry at a perceived hypocrisy by a congregation that says you are welcome, but only welcome to come so far in the door, not all the way in—close, but not too close.

For both Jews and non-Jews, the issue has a symbolic as well as a practical significance. Because there is so much pain embedded in these discussions, somewhere in the process this pain needs to be acknowledged and participants need to be given the opportunity to talk about their feelings and relevant experiences. A safe structure is essential if people are to talk about either the pain or fears that impact on their opinions. Paying attention to the emotional valence will make the study and decision-making process less acrimonious.

The challenge is to make the process spiritually uplifting. This can happen only when the humanity of each person is allowed to surface. This spiritual uplift can also take place if this study process becomes an opportunity to reexamine and recommit to our deeper values—to remind ourselves why we belong to the Jewish people.

Criteria of Belonging

Decisions about the role of the non-Jewish spouse ought to be based

on the explicit values of the synagogue community. The mission statement is a good place to start. What are we here for? What are the values of our synagogue? What is the congregation's responsibility as a Jewish community to its members, to the families of its members, to the Jewish people, to the larger society?

There is a continuum of possible participation for non-Jews in both the ritual and the civic areas of synagogue life. The ritually related questions are: can non-Jews be counted in a minyan, lead part of the service, be called to the Torah, or be accorded any honors? In the civic realm, we need to ask if they can be members, serve on the board, serve on or chair a committee, or be president of the congregation.

Any congregation debating these questions needs to realize that the decisions arrived at not only effect the personal lives of the individuals in question, their families and the congregation, but also the future of the Jewish people as a whole. The Jewish people and our traditions therefore have a stake in each congregation's decision.

The Reconstructionist movement has affirmed on several occasions criteria for conversion: a process of serious study of Judaism, *berit milah* (circumcision) or *hatafat dam berit* (a ritual drop of blood) for a man, and *tevilah* (ritual immersion) for both men and women. More than just a study process, conversion is a ritual of mutual acceptance on the part of the Jew by choice and on the part of the

Jewish people. Conversion makes one a full member of the Jewish people with all rights and responsibilities.

Can one belong to the Jewish people and not be a Jew? I have been asked, "Can I have a secular conversion?" meaning, "Can I join the Jewish people, but not subscribe to its religion?" I recognize, somewhat paradoxically, that many born Jews do not believe in the religious aspects of Judaism, yet they do not thereby lose their status as Jews. The tradition has always rejected belief as a criterion of belonging for anyone who is the child of a Jewish woman, but has maintained belief as a criterion for conversion. Reconstructionists too insist that accepting some version of Jewish belief—demonstrated through conversion—is necessary to join the Jewish people. Is it not paradoxical, then, that by granting a non-Jew the ability to join a synagogue we have created, in effect, a "secular conversion"?³

Every study done about children of intermarriages indicates that if the gentile spouse converts, the children of the marriage are far more likely to be identified as Jewish. Conversion is, in part, a meaningful act because it leads to a change in status. Our challenge is to encourage conversion without exerting pressure, by making becoming Jewish attractive, fulfilling and uplifting. We also must continue to make welcome non-Jewish spouses who are not considering conversion.

Permeable or Fixed Boundaries?

It is a truism in anthropology and sociology that only those groups sur-

vive that maintain clear and strong boundaries. Living in the most open host society in our history and experiencing high rates of intermarriage and assimilation, we need to examine where we draw our boundaries. It is useful to keep in mind that intermarriage among all ethnic groups (except African-Americans) and religious denominations has shot up sharply in the last twenty years. We are part of a larger social phenomenon. The more permeable our boundaries are, the higher the probability that we will be absorbed by the larger community. Those are the lessons of biology, physics and history. And those same disciplines also teach that permanently fixed and rigid boundaries lead to ossification.

Where do we draw the boundary in civic matters? The Reconstructionist movement has been on record for at least a decade in welcoming the non-Jewish spouse into the community. The results of a FRCH poll in 1992 show that a majority of Reconstructionist congregations consider the non-Jewish spouse a voting member of the congregation, while placing restrictions on the civic roles they can play (e.g. they are restricted from being President, and chair of the ritual and education committees). Inclusivity, being welcoming, concern about feelings and communal ties were the deciding arguments for congregations that voted to include gentile partners in the civic life of the congregation. It was argued that the non-Jewish spouse, tied to the congregation through family ties, has a voice

about its future and, by extension, in the future of the Jewish people. It should be noted in this context that many congregations give each household unit one vote.

In congregations where membership was not accorded, even though those congregations were committed to welcoming non-Jews, the prevalent analogy was with citizenship. One can migrate to the United States, pay taxes and enjoy the privileges of living here, but one cannot vote unless one becomes a citizen and declares allegiance to the country. By extension, one cannot have a vote over the future of the congregation till one declares allegiance to its belief system—by converting.

One might categorize those who accorded voting membership as giving precedence in drawing their boundaries to the value of maintaining relationships and community, and those who did not accord voting membership as giving precedence in drawing their boundaries to the value of maintaining structure and law. Good and well-meaning people differ over the issue of where to draw the lines, but there is agreement that boundaries are needed.

Function of Belief

To draw these boundaries well, we need to be asking large questions: Do we want to maintain the distinctiveness of Judaism and of the Jews as a distinct group in society? What are the implications of easing boundaries? Is groupness necessary to maintain meaning and value in Jewishness? Is groupness a goal or a strategy?

To answer them, let us return to our definition of Judaism—our Reconstructionist mission statement, “Judaism is the evolving *religious civilization* of the Jewish people.” It is religion that has given our civilization meaning, and been our glue, our *raison d’être*. It is particularly in the religious realm that we must pay special attention to our boundaries.

I would argue that *maintenance of groupness is essential*, because it allows everything else to happen. The Jewish religion requires group participation: one needs ten people, a *minyan*, as the minimum number required for public worship. And certain prayers can only be said in public worship, perhaps the most important of which is the *kaddish*, obligatory while mourning. Judaism is not a religion that promotes the solitary quest. The spiritual life of the Jew requires community.⁴

Given the role that Judaism as a religion plays in our civilization, it is important to be very conscious about how decisions about boundaries are made and who makes them, remembering that boundaries act out our self-definition. In religious matters, we act as representatives of the tradition. Any person leading a required portion of the service represents the community to itself and to God. The *halakhah* is very clear that a non-Jew cannot lead the community in any required prayers.⁵ I can find no ethical or functional reasons for a Reconstructionist to argue with this tradition. One function of a *minyan* is the recreation, reaffirmation of the covenant. Reconstructionists have

understood that public worship connects us with all Jews who came before us and all those to come after us. It would be difficult to make this connection with a non-Jew as the leader of traditional prayer, or as the giver of a *Devar Torah*. (The role of the gentile in leading additional readings or having a role in acts such as opening the ark is a separate, and certainly debatable point.)

Individual Needs vs. Group Needs

One other reason that the role of the non-Jew in our congregations poses a dilemma for us is that it highlights the tension between the needs of the individual and the needs of the community. Western liberal democratic culture has placed the needs and rights of the individual above the needs of society as a whole. (This is the core critique offered by the contemporary Communitarian movement.) Judaism, and particularly Reconstructionism, understands that there is a tension between the needs of the individual and the needs of the group. Both sets of needs cannot always be served.

We may understand and respect a particular non-Jew who is a member of our community. We may even have a range of negative feelings and doubts about ourselves by limiting that individual’s role—circumscribing his or her freedom. But it is helpful in thinking this matter through to put ourselves in the gentile’s place relative to our community. What Jew would expect to go to church and take Com-

munion without being a believing member of that church's faith tradition? Why should a non-Jew have a similar expectation about interacting with our *sancta*?

Wrestling with these boundary questions provides an opportunity for all of us to deepen our understanding of some important Reconstructionist values. The question, "Why be Jewish?" is very much on the minds of many Jews, especially young adults. The desire for a universal connection and for a breaking down of boundaries is very strong, and, in many cases, reflects noble and worthy ideals. But we continually need to revisit the paradox that strengthening group ties does not necessarily lead to chauvinism, but can actually make the sense of universal feelings and connections more attainable. We are not human beings in general, but particular human beings from a particular people, better able therefore to interact with others, who also live in their own particularity.

American life today is faced simultaneously with an increase in "me-first" individualism and a fragmentation into groups concerned primarily about their own well-being. Jews' ability to live with and manage the tensions surrounding the responsibility of the individual to the group and of the group to the individual may therefore hold important lessons and even bring healing to the fissures in our society. How we Jews model our learning in this area may well be the key to our ongoing vitality. ♦

1. I will use the terms "non-Jew" and "gentile" interchangeably. Each of these words elicits visceral responses in us and has its drawbacks.

2. *M. Berakbot* 8:8 reads: "One answers 'Amen' after a Jew who blesses, but one does not answer 'Amen' after a Samaritan [*kuti*] who blesses, unless he hears the entire blessing." *The Mishnah Berurah* of R. Israel Meir Kagan to *Shulhan Arukh, Orach Hayim* 215:2, notes that when a Gentile mentions God s/he is not referring to an idol or a false God; therefore it is possible to respond with "Amen." This precedent is cited by Rabbi Joan Friedman in an unpublished responsum that served as the basis for the CCAR responsum on non-Jewish participation in the synagogue service.

3. Geela Rayzel Raphael, a student at RRC, has developed a ceremony for non-Jews who want to identify as members of the community, but are not ready to convert, using the biblical category, *ger toshav*, resident alien. In biblical terms, the *ger toshav* is expected to observe Shabbat (Ex. 20:10), fast on Yom Kippur (Lev.16:29), and participate in religious festivals (Deut. 16:11).

4. Gordon Lafer, "Universalism and Particularism in Jewish Law: Making Sense of Political Loyalties," in *Jewish Identity*, David Theo Goldberg and Michael Krausz, eds. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), 201-02, writes: "For liberals, the individual is the fundamental, and in some sense the only real, unit of political life. Inevitably, then, liberal formulations of community, tribe, or nation tend to be anemic...collectivities... represent[ing] useful combinations of individual wills, but they can never take on independent moral significance....By contrast, Jewish political thought does not begin from an original sovereignty. Neither the nation, nor its laws, derive their meaning from the alienated authority of individuals; on the contrary, the individual in large ways derives his or her identity from membership in the collectivity. Jews are joined together not by a social contract, but by a covenantal relationship that binds each one to the law and to one another."

5. *M. Rosh Hashanah* 3:8, quoted in Joan Friedman, unpublished responsum.

Messianic Jews as Mirror

BY CAROL HARRIS-SHAPIO

Not since the proliferation of Jewish religious sects two thousand years ago have we been so uncertain about the meaning and boundaries of Jewish identity. In the United States we have long struggled with our self-definition: is Jewishness an ethnic identity, a religious identity, or both? Conversion and descent standards that make one a Jew in one movement are not accepted in another. Increased intermarriage complicates matters even further. When can non-Jews be part of our ritual and communal life and when can they not? What about children whose parents are raising them as "both Jewish and Christian"? As we enter the twenty-first century, our sense of where the Jewish community begins and ends, our Jewish self-definition, is profoundly called into question.

Every group at some time or other responds to a challenge of inclusivity with, "This is not who we are." Only through intelligent standard-setting can a social organization maintain a sense of purpose and foster a sense of commonality. Such standards function as boundaries, distinguishing

between "what we are" and "what we are not."

An ongoing test case for Jewish boundary-setting, that of the "Messianic Jews," more commonly known as the "Jews for Jesus," demonstrates the difficulty of our task today. While the Jewish community has emphatically ousted Messianic Jews from our congregations and communal organizations, I contend that we have inadequately answered their challenge, "Why shouldn't we be included in the Jewish community?" As we face ever more complex decisions of "who is a Jew?" and "what is a Jew?" in the everyday lives of our synagogues and communal institutions, examining our response to the Messianic Jews might prepare us better for what is to come.

What is Messianic Judaism?

Messianic Judaism emerged from the Hebrew Christian movement, a Protestant missionary effort of the nineteenth- and twentieth-centuries that targeted Jews using Yiddish-speaking pastors and services on Saturdays. Its goal was to join new Jewish

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converts to existing Gentile churches, but recognizing levels of anti-Semitism in those churches, some missions would hold special services for Hebrew Christians alone. Until the 1960's, the content of such services was almost wholly devoid of Jewish referents, save for the occasional Jewish star at the front of the room.

This changed dramatically in the 1960's and 1970's. As young Jews rediscovered the joys of Jewishness, Jews coming to Christianity through the Jesus movement demanded that they be able to express their ethnic pride by wearing *kipot* at services, singing Hebrew songs and Israeli dancing. Their impetus changed the name to Messianic Judaism, reflecting the belief that Jews who accept Yeshua/Jesus as their Messiah are in fact returning to "true Judaism." As of 1991, there were approximately 120 Messianic synagogues in the United States, where worship is conducted with various symbols of Jewish identity. These congregations are reserved for Messianic Jews and "Messianic Gentiles," Christians who are supposedly in solidarity with the Jewish people.¹

Long aware of the existence of Jewish-Christian groups, I was always fascinated with the amount of fury they seemed to provoke from my local Jewish community. "Nazi! Traitor! Brain-washed!" are but a few of the epithets hurled at the Messianic Jews. Why, during the 1970's and 1980's, did a large Jewish community demonstrate against this group in huge numbers, allegedly threaten members with vio-

lence, accuse them of cult practices and worse?² Why is there still an intense fear and anger emanating from the Jewish community? Given the large numbers of born Jews who have converted to Christianity as adults (estimated at 210,000),³ why all the vitriol toward a group that may number, at most, 10,000 born Jews?⁴

To answer these and other questions, I chose a highly controversial Messianic Jewish community for my dissertation research during the years 1990-1991. I spent that year in field research, going to their services, sharing in their social and life cycle events, conducting interviews. While I wish to make it clear that I do not accept Messianic Jewish theological claims, nor their energetic approach to proselytizing, I am more convinced than ever that our outsized reaction to this group has more to do with our own uncertainties and uneasiness about our Jewish identity than it has to do with any specific activity in which this group is involved.

I found little basis for the most extreme accusations against the Messianic Jews. To my knowledge, no child has ever been "snatched" by this group. While they engage in intensive proselytization, almost every Protestant denomination does the same to some degree. Moreover, their members are far from the glassy-eyed zombies one imagines when the word "cult" is used. Their leadership structure is strong and authoritative, and they believe in an active God that intervenes directly in their lives, but this structure and these beliefs are the

same as those of many evangelical churches across the country. Unless we are willing to call millions of such Christians "brainwashed," that term does not describe Messianic Jews either. Interestingly, Messianic Jews promote activities long associated with loyalty to the Jewish people--they support the State of Israel and frown on intermarriage between born Jew and born gentile!

Messianic Jews do not make us uncomfortable for who they are, so much as for their symbolic import to the Jewish community. When thinking about or talking to Messianic Jews, we can become aware just how fragile our own Jewish identity-constructions are. Demonizing the "Jews for Jesus" helps us to focus our attention away from the real boundary issues we face as a community.

Redrawing the Map

Continually delineating Jewish boundaries is nothing new in Jewish history. Through a slow process over the centuries, lines were drawn and redrawn. These were Jews; those were "Others." For those remaining inside the Jewish community in premodern times, Jewish identity was fairly uniform; one was part of a people chosen by God, living under the system of Jewish religious law.

All this changed with Emancipation in the nineteenth century. Under the laws of European nations and removed from the corporate jurisdiction of the rabbinate, Jews discovered new ways to be Jewish--by faith alone, and without observing the full spec-

trum of traditional *mitzvot* (Reform movement), by nationality (Zionist movement) and by culture. These trends, remarkable in the speed with which they altered the Jewish community, have accelerated further in the twentieth century. The State of Israel made secular Jewishness acceptable, and as some secular American Jews made Israel their "religion," they demonstrated unimpeachable Jewish loyalty without religious affiliation.

Thus, Jewish life in America, despite its religious veneer, has seemed to be more about peoplehood than religion.⁵ This emphasis on ethnicity took an interesting twist, as the Baby-Boomers of the 1960's and 1970's experimented with new religions. As Jewish parents learned to say, "My son, the Zen master," we learned to accept that some Jews, while not rejecting their ethnic ties to the Jewish people, might also engage in Buddhist, Hindu or New Age forms of worship--and, with rare exceptions, the Jewish community did not reject them as "lost to the fold."

The 1990 National Jewish Population Survey reflects this pluralism by including all possible definitions of Jewish households, including "Jews by religion, Jews by choice, Jews of no religion, Born Jews raised in another religion, Raised Jewish but converted out, and Gentile Adults in a household with one Jewish individual."⁶ Our notion of Jewish identity clearly has broadened considerably over the last two hundred years, if "Jewish identity" can be found even among Gentile people with one Jewish fami-

ly member! Given this environment, is it any surprise that a group such as the Messianic Jews can also claim Jewish identity?

"We are not Christian"

Our first reaction to the Messianic Jewish claim of shared peoplehood is that Messianic Jews are Christian, not Jewish. After all, if there is one thing American Jews are certain of, it is that we are not Christian. The most marginal Jews may not celebrate Jewish holidays or have any connection to Jewish communal life, but they know that they don't believe in Jesus and don't go to church. Our clinging to this boundary, firm for fifteen hundred years, is often done less for theological reasons than for sociological ones. Because of the imperative of Jewish survival, we feel we must remain distinctive and unique, not assimilating into the Christian majority. For some, lingering elements of our blood-soaked history with Christianity make the eradication of this boundary unthinkable. Old stereotypes that describe the "goyim" as violent, brutish, stupid, and plain inferior reinforce the belief that they are the enemy. None of this is "us," can be "us."

And yet, even as "Jews have tended to elevate the denial of Christian doctrine to a paramount element of their self-definition,"⁷ intermarriage and increased interaction have decreased the level of historically-based suspicion and fear once marking Jewish-Christian relations. Non-Jews are no longer the "enemy" for many of us. In

fact, they are likely to be our spouses, in-laws, children, grandchildren. We can no longer take for granted the sociological barriers that once divided Jews and Christians. And that is not necessarily such a bad thing. It does a disservice to Judaism to maintain our distinction from Christianity only because of what has become a knee-jerk taboo. To know one is a Jew only because one is not a Christian is a terribly weak and hollow form of Jewishness, a minority identity that is difficult to transmit from generation to generation.

New Wine in Old Wineskins

Perhaps the issue is not so much that we see Messianic Jews as Christian. The real rub is that they behave Jewishly. The Messianic Jews use our rituals, our sacred language, but transform our *sancta* to reflect a Christological message. For example, they light candles on Friday night, but invoke Yeshua as the light of the world.

When a "landsman" turns out to be not a "landsman," when we are having a conversation with one of "us" and it turns out to be one of "them," there is an intense sense of betrayal. This religious version of the "Invasion of the Body Snatchers" can elicit strong reactions. The Jewish community accuses the Messianic Jews of deliberate deception: "You pretend to be Jewish just to get converts." And they reply: "But we feel we are Jewish. We are members of the Jewish people. We have every right to use the symbols of our Jewish identity just as you do."

But this answer is often too threatening for us to accept, for it muddies that thin line between "us" and "them," which is so determinative of our identity.

Even if Messianic Jews honestly believe they are expressing their Jewish identity through their rituals, the fact that they are distorting our symbols certainly seems a powerful reason for excluding them from membership in the Jewish community. And yet, do not many Jews use Jewish ritual as containers conveying values and ideas quite different from traditional ones? For example, feminist seders, freedom seders and vegetarian seders (focusing on animal rights) can use the rituals of the Seder to express wholly new beliefs, where a cup of wine can represent menstrual blood, or salt water the tears of Palestinians. Perhaps the most traditional among us would regard this kind of ritual as illegitimate, just as most of us view the ritual innovations of Messianic Jews as illegitimate. And yet, Jews incorporating these new ideas into ritual are not systematically removed from the fold for such creativity.

Christian Claims and Rabbinic Armor

If a sense of "otherness" is not an adequate reason for keeping Jewish Christians out of the Jewish community, what about the wide theological gulf between the two religions? The Messianic Jews would be eager to discuss this with us, claiming that belief in Yeshua is Jewish, and offering to show us Hebrew Bible prophecies that

were ostensibly fulfilled by Yeshua. Here we stand on firmer boundary-making ground, or so we believe. We look back at our rabbinic commentaries to show why these prophecies have been distorted: that Jesus cannot be both God and man; that, one cannot claim to be still Jewish, but also freed from law and covenant. "One cannot be both Jewish and Christian," we exclaim. They are two separate religions."

This is a more solid response, yet there is something off-kilter about this whole project. Most American Jews do not take most of the words of the Bible or the rabbis as authoritative guides to conduct or belief. Many have never actually read the Bible, much less the Talmud. And yet, under threat from the "Jews for Jesus," we suddenly arm ourselves with rabbinic texts to fight off the threat of the missionaries, teaching this especially to our teenagers. There is something deeply ironic about defending our Jewish borders with material we rarely see as important or binding at any other time.

More specifically, if we find Christians beyond the Jewish pale for believing themselves freed from the system of Jewish law, many liberal Jews would agree that we are in a post-halakhic era, marked by choosing our Jewish lifestyle among the available *mitzvot*, rather than submitting ourselves to the "yoke of the Law." Messianic Jews also "pick and choose" among various *mitzvot*—in the congregation I studied, more than a dozen families built *sukkot*, many kept a

form of *kashrut*, all followed the calendar of Jewish holidays (albeit with Christological interpretations of each one). Like many liberal Jews, they understand that they observe these *mitzvot* because they enrich their lives spiritually, rather than following the whole system of *mitzvot* out of a sense of obligation.

Finally, if we critique the Messianic Jews for their belief in a God-man, we need to remember that we generally include secular Jews (1.1 million, according to the 1990 NJPS) within our Jewish borders. Is a belief in a God-man better or worse than a belief in no God, according to traditional Judaism? The answers are inconclusive.⁸

Heretics and Infidels

This leads us to the Messianic Jewish trump card. Declare the Messianic Jews, "You are at best inconsistent, and at worst hypocritical. You claim we violate Jewish religious beliefs by believing in Yeshua, but so do Jewish atheists, those who practice Eastern religions, and they are still members of the tribe. If one can be Jewish by secular and ethnic identity alone, if one can be an ethnic Jew and hold Eastern beliefs, why can't one be Jewish and hold Christian beliefs? Why can't we at least be Jewish, if not Judaic?"

Stuart Charme describes this issue in terms of "heretics" and "infidels." Heretics believe that they are still in the tradition, but hold beliefs quite different than the normative ones. Infidels are unbelievers, those who

have removed themselves from the beliefs of the group entirely. One source of confusion about Jewish identity in the modern world stems from the seeming paradox that the modern Jewish "infidel" (e.g. the Jewish secularist or humanist who does not believe in or practice traditional Judaism) is not only tolerated, but is possibly even normative for large segments of the Jewish community, whereas one particular type of Jewish heretic, the "messianic Jew," is regarded with great alarm by the Jewish community.⁹ Charme asks, "Why is infidelity better than heresy?"

Even traditional Jewish sources seem to indicate that the Messianic Jews could still be considered Jews. Based on B. Sanhedrin 44a, the apostate, although she may have sinned, is still considered part of Israel. A Jew who is an apostate can be Jewishly married to a "normative" Jew, and a Jew married to an apostate needs a *get* for divorce, indicating that an individual retains Jewish status even if he or she takes on another religious belief.¹⁰ At most, that individual can be barred from Jewish institutional life. It is telling that in the Beresford case of 1989, in which Messianic Jews sought Israeli citizenship under the Law of Return, the majority opinion for excluding the couple was based precisely on the idea of barring apostates, rather than denying that they still had some kind of Jewish identity.¹¹ If we were to be consistent in applying such a ruling, we would have to deny access not only to Messianic Jews, but to all those whose religious beliefs and prac-

tices make them equally "heretical" or "infidel."

The Reconstructionist Approach

Mordecai Kaplan recognized that Judaism has always been evolving. However, he decried the idea that this evolution consisted of rudderless drifting through time. Rather, the whole idea of Reconstructionism was to reconstruct Judaism deliberately and thoughtfully. Kaplan created a movement known for its intellectual honesty. As we look ahead to the shape of the Jewish people in the twenty-first century, we certainly need self-examination more than ever.

In the specific case of the Messianic Jews, we see that our exclusion is particularistic and inconsistent. Is it defensible to reject one group for theological improprieties, while many of us in the Jewish fold, according to tradition, also commit such improprieties? Is it defensible to claim historical animosity as the primary reason to keep our distance from Christianity, when Jewish-Christian relations have taken remarkable strides in the last twenty-five years? Is it defensible to condemn the Messianic Jews for ritual innovation when Jewish groups also create far-reaching innovation with sacred ritual?

These questions are important not because of the handful of Messianic Jews themselves, but because of the greater challenges we now face in boundary-setting. The first important

challenge raised for the rest of us by the Messianic Jews is, "Are we, in our fundamental identity, a religion or an ethnic group?" Practically, by including secular Jews as legitimate and honored members of our people, we seem to indicate that ethnicity is our bottom line. How, then, do we respond, for example, to an ethnic Jew, loyal to the Jewish people, who shares the theological beliefs of another religion? How about an atheist non-Jew who wants to become part of the Jewish people, but can't accept any idea of God? If we accept secular born Jews, should we accept a secular Jew by choice?

The second major challenge raised by the Messianic Jews is, "Why do Jews reject Christianity as a viable belief option--out of a sense of theological conviction or a sociological sense of 'otherness'?" How we answer this question might help us to come to decisions as to how much a non-Jew can participate in the life of the synagogue, or what we do with a person who has been raised to believe that she is both Jewish and Christian, and wants to belong to our synagogue.

Until we are clearer about our own core identity, we cannot begin to formulate coherent and helpful responses to these issues. We need to find some common ground as to who we are in order to set all-important criteria for determining the boundaries of our synagogues and institutions in the decades to come. ♦

1. Carol A. Harris-Shapiro, *Syncretism or Struggle: The Case of Messianic Judaism* (Ann Arbor, UMI, 1992), 25-64.
2. C. Conway, "900 Protest Efforts of Messianic Jews," *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, October 1, 1984, 1-B+; G. Silver, "Overbrook Park Under Siege," *Welcomat*, November 14-20, 1984, 1+.
3. B. Kosmin, et.al., *Highlights of the CJF 1990 National Jewish Population Survey* (New York, Council of Jewish Federations, 1991), 4.
4. The total number of Messianic Jews is difficult to ascertain. One Messianic Jewish leader claimed in 1991 that there were over 120 Messianic Jewish congregations in the United States, including Messianic congregations still affiliated with Protestant denominations. The size of each congregation varies widely, from less than 10 members in some congregations to 400 adult members in others. Taking one major Messianic Jewish congregational movement (The Union of Messianic Jewish Congregations) as a standard, in which the average size of a congregation is 75 members, 60% of whom are born Jewish, there would be no more than 6,000 born Jews involved in Messianic Judaism. Even imagining huge growth in the last three years (there has been some growth, but probably not this much), it is still probable that the number of born Jews involved in Messianic Judaism is less than 10,000. Why, then, do both the Messianic Jewish organizations and Jews for Judaism accept numbers anywhere from 100,000 to 150,000 Messianic Jews? That figure, promoted by Messianic Jewish organizations, reflects the number of people of Jewish origin calling themselves Christian by religion, whether they belong to a Messianic congregation or are members of larger Christian denominations. See D. H. Stern, *Messianic Jewish Manifesto*, (Jerusalem, Jewish New Testament Publications, 1991), 197-198.
5. Nathan Glazer, *American Judaism*, 2nd ed. (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1972), 121-128.
6. Kosmin, et. al., 2-3.
7. Stuart Charme, "Heretics, Infidels and Apostates: Menace, Problem, or Symptom?" *Judaism* 36 (Winter, 1987), 23.
8. In a letter to the editor, an Orthodox rabbi responds to a Reform rabbi in this way, "The Hebrew Christians believe, in error, that the Messiah has come; Reform Judaism rejects the belief in a personal Messiah, which is to my mind an even greater deviation from Torah theology." See A.J. Yuter, "Reform is told about religious authenticity," *Jewish Post and Opinion*, October 23, 1991, 3.
9. Charme, 19.
10. Charme, 22. Rashi's commentary on *B. Sanhedrin* 44a shows that even apostate Jews retained certain personal status as Jews in the community.
11. David Novak, "When Jews are Christians," *First Things* (Issue 17, November 1991. 42-46), 45-46.

When Jews Celebrate with Christians

BY CY SWARTZ

Contemporary American society has intertwined the lives of Jews and Christians through marriage, neighborhood, and the greater openness that has developed in the past fifty years. Interfaith weddings are commonplace, and public announcements of these events regularly include references to the joint participation of Jewish and Christian clergy. Day care centers sponsored by several churches in my upper-middle-class, predominantly Christian, Philadelphia community include Hanukah as part of their winter curriculum. The local Friends' Meeting sponsors a Seder for its members, because so many of them are married to Jews or had been born as Jews and not as birthright Quakers.

The secularity of contemporary life and the easy movement from one group to another present serious challenges to Jews and to Christians. The boundaries that once were so clear have become permeable and fuzzy. Christians and Jews who are concerned about the survival of their traditions must reexamine and redefine

the boundaries that have developed in the past two thousand years. The social and cultural realities of contemporary life have made it necessary for all of us to explore ways of relating to each other that will allow each of us to honor our traditions, respect the other's tradition, and live creatively in the present.

Visions within Jewish tradition that are inclusive of all people encourage/enable us to develop working relationships with other liberal religious traditions. A clear description of our expectations and an understanding of the necessary boundaries between Judaism and Christianity can help us to develop the kind of cooperative effort that is needed to make the social visions of our spiritual heritages real. Effective processes for sharing our visions of a perfected world cannot only strengthen our connection to our particular traditions, but should help all of us to become working partners with God.

Beyond Chosenness

Reconstructionism's rejection of chosenness creates space for Jews to be

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open to other religious traditions. I feel supported by the philosophical underpinnings of our movement in developing meaningful discourse with members of other faith traditions, increasing *gemilut hasadim* and enhancing the process of *tikun olam*.

In this spirit, Kaplan writes: "Jews...have entered into such intimate relationship with the life of the world about them that they can no longer envisage their own deliverance except as a phase of general human deliverance. If miracles are to be enacted as part of the future redemption, they cannot be conceived as similar to those which tradition associates with the Exodus. The new redemption to which Jews look forward involves the redemption of society in general from its present ills. It implies the transformation of human nature and social institutions through the divine power of intelligence and goodwill."¹

What better way to learn how to act on this basic imperative of our tradition than to examine and experience its practices in the vibrant context of our multi-ethnic, multi-religious society? To really acknowledge the shared redemption for which we strive, we need to develop positive cooperation and meaningful celebrations with Christians. To do so appropriately, I believe that it is important that we know how to celebrate the Sabbath and the holidays, understand the social and moral concerns of Judaism, and understand the developmental processes of Jewish life.

Three years ago, I joined a Bible study group with four local Methodist ministers. The primary reason for our meetings was to study the weekly lectionary. I entered the group in a dual role: to learn more about Christianity and its sacred texts and to share my understanding of *Tanakh* and of Jewish interpretive process. Together we are learning the ways in which our traditions are connected and the great textual challenges and barriers that separate us.

I have sometimes found myself known by name, but not really known. I have had to teach my partners about the anti-Semitic parts of western history, which are not included in secular education. It is not easy for Christians to understand how the major symbols of their tradition can inspire fear in many Jews. Symbols that represent love, compassion, and hope for them, frequently are sources of discomfort for us.

By developing boundaries that respect our traditions and that allow us to gain an appreciation and an understanding of each other, we have begun to interact creatively in ways that are not *pareve* in the style of the "melting-pot". Our shared experiences have been planned and designed to respect each tradition, at the same time that they affirm the validity of the other. In this dialogue, it has been just as important to acknowledge and honor our differences as our similarities. Differences clearly pose greater challenges to all of us, but if we do not adequately honor them, we are not really in dialogue.

When We Can't Celebrate Together

Our experience in stating clearly who we are has led me to conclude that Passover/Easter is the wrong holiday for us to try to share, despite the fact that joint Jewish-Christian celebrations at this season are sought after by many churches, especially those with significant numbers of born Jews. The Exodus and the Resurrection are the central events which define each tradition's particular relationship with God. We equate God's role in our liberation from Egyptian slavery to the importance of God's role in the creation of the world. Passover celebrations offer ways of renewing our special relationship as Jews to each other and to God.

For Christians, the Resurrection is the central event around which their special relationship to God is organized. The harsh criticism of the Pharisees which is embedded in the Easter narrative and the later substitution of Jesus for the paschal sacrifice make it impossible for Jews and Christians to blend the Passover and Easter narratives and to celebrate our founding myths together.

The attempt to do so can only emphasize centuries' history of hurts and suspicion, inappropriate to a mutual celebration. To establish true dialogue about the Passover-Exodus story would require that Christians undertake a serious re-examination of their canon and especially of the sections that have inspired and justified anti-Semitism. Too many passages in the Second Testament describe our

rejection of the divinity of Jesus in negative ways. Our "stiff-necked" adherence to the Law" has been used to justify and rationalize their persecution or missionizing of us. Christian identification of *Tanakh* as the "Old" rather than the older Testament denies the vitality and relevance of Judaism and its texts to contemporary life.

But *Tikun Olam* Unites Us

Despite the obstacles embedded in Scripture and in practice, there are many possibilities for positive interaction. *Tikun olam* is one of the major values that we share with Christians who are dedicated to making God real in the world through social action and political advocacy.

The theme that best lends itself to cooperation and shared celebration between Jews and Christians is the fate of our common planet. Religion can help us overcome our all-too-common alienation from the natural world. For me and my Christian study partners, the close relationship between ecological issues and religion has become a major source of understanding. We have been able to create shared experiences for ourselves and our congregations, which were expressly designed to raise the ecological consciousness of the participants.

Life on our planet is threatened by the negative residue of the technological revolution. Species are dying faster than we can count. Once we believed that God--the gods--the goddesses were able to intervene and to save us and the land. Prayer still has the potential to remind us of our con-

nection to the earth and the power of the nature. It can encourage and inspire us to positive action. We are challenged to learn how to pray and work together for the common good of the planet.

One of the Methodist congregations has incorporated Sukkot into their practice, reading the verses from the Gospel of John (7:10ff) that describe Jesus's first visit to Jerusalem at the time of Tabernacles. The congregation now shares in the earth-consciousness that has long been part of our liturgy and in synagogue practice. They have recited Zalman Schachter-Shalomi's ecological Hoshanna prayer,² and have sat in a leafy bower constructed outside of their church, using the worship time to enhance their appreciation of their connection to the natural world. It is eminently possible for Jews and Christians to share this festival, for Jewish tradition has long regarded it as the most universal of the festivals.³ Furthermore, it has not been coopted in any way by Christianity. The same is true, of course, of Tu be-Shevat, which offers manifold opportunities for appreciating nature's bounty and rededicating ourselves to protecting the earth for future generations.

The Annual Winter Holiday Dilemma

As the winter solstice approaches, Americans are bombarded with carefully designed messages about spending money in the spirit of the season. We find ourselves having to fight the "I want that!" which overwhelms the

country, from postage stamps to the color of the foil that is wrapped around our chocolates. It is a challenge for adherents of all faiths to honor the spiritual dimension of our heritages in the midst of this red and green flood.

We are invited to a round of holiday parties. We welcome the opportunity to share food, drink, and good times with friends and neighbors, to find Christmas trees beautiful, and the musical offerings of the season, rich and varied. Many of us have grown up in schools where we learned the words of all the familiar carols. Our children may be in schools where Hanukah and Kwanza are now included in the holiday celebration, but like us, they are sucked into the energy of the predominant Christian culture. We find ourselves participating in the spirit of the season as the market forces intend!

There is indeed a need to celebrate the short days and the dark of the year, and to remind each other that there is much light available, even if we cannot physically see it. Christians and Jews have found special ways to celebrate miracles and light, the earth and its quiescence, and to mark this season. Each tradition has developed special ways to brighten and celebrate the darkest time of the year.

The secular and economic challenges to the spiritual success of traditional Jewish and Christian December holidays led to the development of a new kind of ecumenical event in Philadelphia last year. During Advent, three days before the first

candle of Hanukah, a group of people from the four Methodist congregations and Mishkan Shalom, a Reconstructionist congregation, gathered on a Sunday afternoon to help each other prepare to celebrate the "miracles" that our traditions attribute to this time of the year, and to share the experience of the winter solstice and the hibernation of plants and animals.

The earth became our common meeting place. We walked in the rain to a local community garden and experienced the quiet, wet, cold of winter. We acknowledged our differences, but sang no carols, and spun no dreidels. Instead, we shared some of the challenges of finding meaningful ways in this season to honor and dignify our religious traditions.

The events I have described here are works in progress, representing an attempt on the part of Christians and Jews to come together in new ways of celebration. Those of us who do not believe that the "old time religion" can maintain Judaism as a positive force in the life of the world need seri-

ously to consider our relationship to those who have inherited or have chosen to follow other spiritual paths. If *gemilut hasadim* is truly one of the three pillars that supports the world, as the rabbis claim (*M. Avot* 1:2), then, as we search for meaningful ways to honor, enliven, and transmit our tradition, Jews need to define our religious life both in terms of the work we do within the Jewish community and in relationship to the needs of the world at large. ♦

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1. *The Meaning of God in Modern Jewish Religion* (1937; rpt. New York: Reconstructionist Federation, 1962), 266.
 2. My favorite stanza reads: "*Hosha na* for the sake of the zebus and the zebras/ aardvarks and armadillos/ bears and babies/ children and chimpanzees/ deers and dromedaries/ elks and moose/ fawns and families/ giraffes and gorillas/ Homo Sapiens and hominids/ instinctual and intelligent life/ *Hosha na*."
 3. The seventy sacrifices offered on Sukkot were understood by the rabbis as representing the seventy nations of the world; Zech. 14:16, in the *haftarah* for Sukkot, envisions a time when all the nations of the world will worship one God and assemble to celebrate Sukkot together.

Sibling Rivals

BY NANCY FUCHS-KREIMER

The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son: The Transformation of Child Sacrifice in Judaism and Christianity (New Haven: Yale University Press; 1993, 256 pp.)

Rarely does one come across a work that makes familiar material appear fresh, as if one had just donned a new set of reading glasses. Reading this book, I would constantly pause at some new insight or connection, and exclaim, "Why didn't I notice that before?" Such is the power of really original scholarship.

Levenson argues that ancient Israelite law knew of the requirement that the first-born son be given to God (Ex. 22:28-29), and that this requirement was not, as scholars have apologetically suggested, a bit of paganism that was utterly eradicated. Rather, it was once practiced, and later transformed into a foundational story of Judaism: the first-born belongs to God, the beloved son—generally not the first-born—is chosen by the father for suffering and exaltation (i.e. death or near death or symbolic death followed by eventual elevation to the status of ruler). The transformation takes the form of both narrative and ritual: the link between

Moriah and the Temple cult (2 Chron. 3:1); the paschal lamb in lieu of the first-born (Ex. 12:21-23); Levitical service (Num. 8:16-19); the institution of the Nazirite (Num. 6:1-21); and circumcision (Ex. 4:24-26, Gen 17:2).

In biblical narrative, the most explicit examples are the binding of Isaac (Genesis 22); Jephtha's vow (Judges 11:29-40); and Mesha (2 Kings 3:26-27). But, more subtly, the entire book of Genesis is seen as a prolonged meditation on the issue of sons, beloved and not. Levenson suggests we look again at a number of sons in Genesis: Abel is chosen by God over his brother, with results that are tragic; Cain suffers exile; Ishmael suffers exile and near death, in fact, death as far as Abraham knows; Isaac nearly dies; Jacob suffers exile to escape the wrath of the unchosen brother, slavery to Laban and seeming death, as far as Isaac knows; and, finally, Joseph suffers, exile, symbolic going down to death in the pit, slavery, the wrath of

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the unchosen brothers, and, again, seeming death in Jacob's eyes.

These narratives transform the motif of the sacrificed son in two ways. First, the special son is no longer the actual first-born, but one chosen by God. (There is a similar pattern in the choice of Moses, David, Solomon). Second, the death can be evaded, by substituting an animal for the beloved son: the ram is sacrificed in Isaac's stead; the Destroyer in Exodus 12:23 is tricked by the blood of the lamb and all first-born Israelites live. The use of animals to confuse identity is rampant: Jacob tricks Isaac by wearing the hide of a goat; he is later tricked into thinking Joseph is dead, because of the blood of a goat on Joseph's garment.

It should be clear by now why the story of the beloved son is foundational for Judaism. The Jewish people come to understand themselves as God's beloved son. Israel is the first-born son (Ex. 4:22ff), the chosen one (Isa. 42:1). So Genesis is also a prolonged meditation on chosenness. The price of chosenness is clear: exile, slavery, near death. But the promise of chosenness is also clear, a place at the center of things, to be God's beloved child, to be Isaac. And in the end, despite the suffering, God will not let the beloved son down.

Christian Origins

If this were the entire thesis, it would be a challenging and interesting book. But Levenson goes on to argue that this story is also the foundational story of Christianity. The

formative story of the Hebrew Bible, the story of the beloved son, shapes the way the life and death of Jesus is understood and retold. First, Jesus is understood to be the beloved son of God (Mark 1:11). Second, we learn that God so loved the world he gave his only son (in John 3:16, God and Abraham have changed places). Third, Jesus is seen as Isaac, the willing martyr. Fourth, the son is combined with the paschal lamb, crucified the afternoon of *erev Pesah* (John 19:36). Finally, the story of Joseph deeply influences the Jesus story. Just as Joseph was betrayed by his brothers (sold for silver pieces by Judah), so was Jesus. So, too, will Jesus finally rule over all, as the prince of God.

Not only do Judaism and Christianity share a foundational story—the beloved son and his trials and tribulations—but they also share in common the belief that the story is about their identity as a religious community. Just as the Jewish people understood themselves to be God's chosen, the Church, too, came to see itself as the beloved son.

Just as the Jews later midrashically read out the Ishmaelites and the Edomites from their share of Abraham's blessing, so the Christians borrow Jewish chosenness and then read out the Jews. In Galatians 3:16, Paul equates Jesus with Isaac. Since all members of the Church are Christ's body, the Church becomes Isaac, the chosen son. And who are the Jews? Without question, they are Ishmael (Gal. 4:21-31). The Church makes a deeply Jewish move, displacing the

older son (just as Isaac, Jacob and Joseph did) and seeing itself now as the sole heir to the promise.

Are We So Different?

At the end of his work, Levenson suggests that Judaism and Christianity are really not as different as they have sometimes been portrayed, especially on the question of universalism. Both religions have at their core a story that envisions its own faith community as the beloved son of God; neither leaves much room for the displaced son. While both aspire to universalism, especially in our P.C. world, neither can ever deny that “ancient, protean, and strangely resilient story.” The two traditions are siblings, competing midrashic systems, still in rivalry, as it were, for their father’s blessing.

Just as Levenson’s thesis undercuts one of the classic Christian polemics against Judaism—“you folks are too particularistic,” so too does it undercut a classic Jewish polemic against Christianity—“the story you tell does not follow from biblical faith; it is a hellenistic aberration.” We see that we are more similar than we had imagined.

And here, Levenson leaves us, having provided more than our money’s worth. I would love to see another scholar, trained in the social sciences, pick up the theme Levenson has so brilliantly identified and bring to bear anthropological or psychological methods to pose some fascinating inquiries to this formative story. Why would people imagine that God wants

them to give up their first-born son, or their beloved one? Could it be that as parents our greatest fear is that the child who is so miraculously given into our care will somehow be equally mysteriously taken away? Do people express that anxiety by telling stories and creating rituals in which the worst that can be imagined is stated and then played out?

What Now?

Levenson beautifully traces the midrashic process that has shaped this powerful, mythic tale into the traditions we know and live by. But he does not ask what the midrashic process might yet have in store for the beloved son in our time. *We are no less able to write midrash than our ancestors.* It seems to me that both Jews and Christians should begin to rethink the story of the beloved son, that is, the whole myth of our chosenness.

The development of the story, as Levenson describes it, took place in a world quite dissimilar from the one we inhabit. I see three major differences between our time and theirs, all of which point to a fundamental transformation that might yet take place in the foundational stories of both Judaism and Christianity.

First, Rabbinic Judaism and Christianity each shaped its self-understandings while in bitter conflict with the other. Jews and Christians set out who they were as peoples of God in part out of a need to define themselves over and against the other group who was making the same claim. Now, in

post-Holocaust America, some Jews and Christians are in profound conversation with one another, writing their own versions of midrash, while amicably eavesdropping on each other. That will inevitably change what is said.

Second, the stories Levenson reports largely concern a drama played by men: fathers and sons. Levenson never stops to ask: would these stories look different if they had been written by women, or if they were largely about mothers and daughters? Did fathers imagine a beloved son and a displaced son in a way that mothers (who carried each child in their wombs) could not? Would women have a different vision of parenting, of siblings, of sacrifice? At least, let us begin to ask what women, who are now engaging their own traditions, might think of all this.

Third, the stories of Judaism and Christianity that Levenson reports come from a world of victors and victims. The Joseph story shows a young man who dreamed of ruling over his brothers reduced to the depths, but ultimately ruling over them, just as he had imagined. The apocalyptic literature that forms a bridge between Judaism and Christianity sees the Jewish people triumphing and Rome

being vanquished in a world of winners and losers. The powerful story that Levenson lifts up is a story of how the son who appears to be the loser can become the winner in the end.

But perhaps the model of winners and losers no longer makes much sense. At one point, Levenson speaks eloquently about the absolutism, of the Hebrew Bible: "All things work out for Abraham not because, hedging his bets, he finds a middle way between his two great loves, but because God respects and rewards the uncompromising obedience—obedience even unto death—that he demands from those he has chosen" (p. 222). True enough concerning the biblical Abraham and the history of the three traditions (I now include Islam) that look to him as father. But in the world we now share, along with many other peoples, perhaps finding the middle way, the compromise, offers the only possibility for all of our surviving. Maybe in the last half of the twentieth century, we have finally reached a time when, for our own safety, we each need to abandon claims of being the beloved son and become, simply, God's children. It is surely not as grand a story, or as protean, but in the long run, it may prove more resilient. ♦

MANY VOICES IN ONE MIND

BY SHEILA WEINBERG

Over the years, I have sampled a lot of teachers and forms of Eastern practice and New Age offerings including karate, yoga, tai ch'i, Sufi dancing, the Gurdjieff work, vision-questing and the twelve steps. Some of these I have tasted for a week, others for years at a time, some filtered through the Jewish lenses of Reb Zalman Schachter-Shalomi and P'nai Or. At a certain point, I committed myself to living with a Jewish cultural, ethnic and spiritual center, and to becoming a rabbi, but I never let go of sampling the fruits of other traditions.

What drove me to these paths? I always had a desire to change myself and the world and to probe the nature of reality. I was drawn out of an absence in my life, an absence of presence and peace. I was drawn out of a recognition of how unfree I am, how driven by moods or demanding inner voices. I was drawn by a desire to be free. I was drawn because I sought a way of being that entailed less suffering, less angst, less fear.

Since becoming rabbi in Amherst, I have been involved in several ten-day silent retreats in a local Buddhist setting. I have helped to create conferences bringing together many Jews on a Buddhist path with spiritually-seeking and mystically-inclined Jews inside Judaism. These encounters, many personal conversations, and a reading of Rodger Kamenetz's brilliantly-crafted book, *The Jew in the Lotus: A Poet's Rediscovery of Jewish Identity in Buddhist India* (Harper-SanFrancisco: 1994), have brewed a rich broth of queries and musings for me. I am forcefully drawn to explore how one might hold a Jewish and Buddhist identity and/or practice and to inquire how the intersection of these traditions can honestly, respectfully, and fruitfully intersect. My remarks here are divided into two broad questions: First, what is the power and attraction of Buddhism for Jews? Second, how and where do we draw boundaries between non-Jewish spiritual practice and non-Jewish identity?

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The Attraction of Eastern Spirituality for Jews

I have identified five factors that make Eastern spirituality and particularly Buddhism, as taught in the West, attractive to spiritually-seeking Jews.

First, Buddhism offers spirituality without the problems modern secular Jews have with God. Four major problems are eliminated right away.

a) Since there is no personal God in Buddhism, there is no conflict between science and reason.

b) Buddhism eliminates the problem of theodicy. There is no personal God trapped in the problem of absolute power versus absolute goodness. This is especially meaningful after Auschwitz, when traditional prayers for salvation and affirmations of God's love to God's people often sound like a mocking exercise in futility and cynicism. Buddhist thought and practice liberate suffering from the "why" and locate it in the "how." One is encouraged to see suffering in one's life as a microcosm of suffering in the world and one gains tools to understand and alleviate suffering.

c) Buddhism's practice and theology minimize feminist issues Jews may have with God. True, Buddha was a man, and there certainly are patriarchal residues in Buddhist culture, but there is no personal God who is always called He, Him, Father, King. The impersonality of the religious experience neutralizes the problematic of always naming a gendered deity.

d) Buddhist thought releases secular Jews from the idea of waiting passively for an all-powerful God to act,

save, or reveal. Jews have gone through the revolution of taking power into our own hands, as socialists and Zionists and capitalists. We are take-charge people who see dependence on an external, transcendent deity as a cop-out. In Buddhism, this hierarchical authority figure is eliminated. Buddhists pray: "May all beings be at peace" instead of "God, grant peace." This shift speaks to the post-secular mind looking for a way into realms of spirit.

A *second* attraction of Eastern spiritual practice is the invitation to transformation through accessible, body-based activities. Meditation and yoga are forms that one can begin immediately without learning new languages or vocabularies. When I sit in meditation, focusing on the breath, observing the mind and sensations, I become my own laboratory for the lessons of impermanence and the insights of awareness. One does not just read the insights of others or hear about concepts, one experiences these concepts in one's own body. I observe the consequences of my own patterns of grasping for security, self-centeredness, fear of loss, judgment of self and other fantasy-construction. As the Jewish woman who is an ordained Buddhist monk, Thubten Pemo, remarks in *The Jew and the Lotus*, "We aren't just saying to have compassion for others, but how to train your mind for compassion" (p.135). I find this the most compelling aspect of Buddhism and the greatest challenge to Judaism.

Third, Buddhist practice promises, through loosening the grip of the ego—the small self with all its stories, worries, and identifications, all its pettiness and greed—to bring us closer to ourselves, to each other and the world. In the experience of deep meditation and through spiritual training, one understands that one is part of a great soul, part of the fullness of being. This awareness helps overcome loneliness and isolation. This aspect of Eastern practice is both attractive and frightening to Jews. In recent generations, so much energy has been put into “staying Jewish,” so much Jewish practice and thought is dedicated to keeping Jews separate. I am aware of a great longing in me to lower the walls of separation as a spirit-seeking being, while simultaneously fearing that union will spell annihilation of Jewish identity.

This paradox is certainly not new in Jewish history. Arthur Green teaches about the inherent dilemma of radical mystical ḥasidic theology that preached: “God’s presence fills all creation.” If that is so, it might be asked, why do we have to observe the commandments, the specific, separate Jewish practices to reach God? The later history of Ḥasidism is a response to this dilemma and a pulling back from that precipice in thought and deed.

A *fourth* powerful allure of Buddhism is its teachers who are models of personal transformation. Many of us have had our fill of preachers who don’t practice, of brilliant intellectuals who are not aware, sensitive or respectful of boundaries in their per-

sonal lives. It is incredibly compelling to be in the presence of someone who radiates love through patience and the offering of full attention, who speaks from a unification of wisdom and compassion, who demonstrates the value of the spiritual practice in every gesture, in every step.

A *fifth* factor in drawing Jews toward Eastern practices, including Buddhism, is the fact that these spiritual cultures have been consciously and systematically tailored for the Western mind and vocabulary. Plucked from its own cultural context, Eastern spiritual practice does not carry the sometimes painful memories, childhood disappointments and family conflicts that often accompany Jewish practice. One can receive a culturally-neutralized spiritual practice. One’s childhood religion may be frozen in time as hypocritical, materialistic, boring, oppressive, superficial. We know all these scars. Many wounded Jews have found a new home in Buddhism. The new home tends to be very sparse, however, because the full range of Buddhist culture and community—holidays, family rituals, food, music, and dance, have not filtered in at the same pace as the spiritual practices.

While this list of five factors is not definitive, I believe it highlights the major power that Eastern forms of spirituality hold out for Jews. What has to happen to Judaism to meet the needs that are being met for Jews by Buddhism? Should Judaism be concerned about responding to these needs?

I think the issue of God is met very powerfully by Reconstructionist theory. Our greatest challenge is the reconstruction of an accessible Jewish spiritual practice that really does make a difference in people's lives, and the training of teachers and leaders who model in their very being the value of Jewish spiritual life. How much already exists within Judaism, in prayer, *mitzvot*, Torah study, applied Jewish mysticism, *tikun olam*, and how much can be borrowed and adapted from non-Jewish forms, raises the issue of boundaries, authenticity, and the legitimacy of spiritual synthesis and hyphenated identities.

Where Do You Draw the Line?

In *The Jew and the Lotus*, Yitz Greenberg and Zalman Schachter-Shalomi embody different approaches. Yitz draws the line between davening and dialogue. He says: "Unlike Zalman, I see liturgy as an affirmation of being a member" (48). I have definitely not drawn the same conclusions. My experience as a Jew entering the world of Buddhist meditation is that my own spirit is so saturated with Jewish language and symbols that whatever insights and awareness I achieve are immediately translated into Jewish terms. The effect on me is an elucidation of Jewish texts and practices from the experience of the *dharma*. Similarly, Rami Shapiro has written an illuminating commentary on *Pirke Avot* that clearly incorporates his contact with Eastern spiritual practice. It connects me to the text in ways that challenge how I live my life in the moment.

My experience tells me that I can learn from other traditions and return to my Jewish center. Am I being naive? The voices of fear and doubt arise. If the rabbi is seen at the ashram does this put the seal of approval on all non-Jewish forms? Does this suggest the spiritual inferiority of Judaism? Won't listening to Buddhist *dharma* and practicing Buddhist meditation lead to a full participation in Buddhist *sangha* (community)? Won't this openness simply be an invitation to flakiness? Won't openness legitimize the actions of those who have turned their back on Judaism? Won't it foster increasing betrayal, rampaging assimilation? The survival of the Jewish people is at stake and it is my fault. Be still, I say to these voices of Jewish terror, isolation, and exhaustion, each of them conditioned by how hard it has been and remains to live in dignity as a minority.

Other questions arise, which impact on all dual-identity persons in our culture. One's identity is hardly made of whole cloth in our world. People are bi-racial and bi-sexual, Irish/Mexican/Native American. The old Yiddish maxim says, "you can't dance at two weddings with one *tuches*." Or can you? Can Jews who have already committed to a Buddhist spiritual practice be integrated into the Jewish community? In many cases they have much to offer. Can one divide the few hours of life between communities, teachings, teachers, holidays and holy acts? How does one educate one's children: as Jewish med-

itators or Buddhist Jews? Do we encourage enclaves of shared dual-identity individuals, marginalized in both worlds?

On a related tack, is Buddhist spiritual practice kosher, but Christian or Moslem practice *treyf*? Historically, Jewish and Christian identities have been more directly in conflict than Buddhist and Jewish identities. Certainly two thousand years of struggle to maintain Judaism in a Christian world has left a bitter legacy. There is no such history with Buddhism, and there is no overt desire on the part of Buddhist teachers to encourage Jews to leave Judaism. In fact Thich Nhat Hanh and the Dalai Lama have both supported Jewish Buddhists' efforts to find meaning in the tradition of their birth. I have been told that I can freely borrow the spiritual practices of insight meditation without taking on any more, without even acknowledging that its source is in Buddhism.

What Is a Jewish Seeker to Do?

What are the options of a Jewish spiritual seeker? Embracing a life as an Orthodox Jew is available for those who are able to make the leap of mind. If you can make that leap, there are tangible rewards in sustainable faith and supportive community. This choice includes sacrifice and separation, and will only be chosen by a minority. Liberal Judaism, by contrast, has not been particularly effective in this century in meeting the needs of those in search of transfor-

mation and liberation. The life of the spirit tends still to be obscured in most liberal religions.

Perhaps therefore it is not such a risk to open to the East, to open to the power of silence, to a renewal of Judaism through the wisdom of millennia of training the mind for compassion, awareness, spaciousness. Certainly we will employ the spiritual treasures and resources of past Jewish civilizations, but why not explore a sensitive and selective incorporation of the very real and alive practices of other traditions?

One question remains: a definition of idolatry for our time. Idolatry is not about worshipping idols, not about bringing ideas and practices into Judaism from outside that enhance and deepen who we are. So much has been borrowed through the epochs of evolving Jewish civilization, that idolatry cannot mean that the other is by definition forbidden.

The second commandment for our day is about the transformation of consciousness. It calls us to freedom in a way that has been articulated not just by Buddhism, but also by the mystical and ḥasidic masters within Judaism. The commandment bids us to see how we make things into our gods and worship them. It summons us to question where we put our attention and how we can exercise choice. In this culture—which worships money and glamor, the trendy, the passing and fleeting, the quick fix—which worships power and force, the false, the glossy, the clever—which venerates running away from the

moment, deadening the pain, covering up—in this culture, we are called to repudiate all this as idolatry and search within our beings for the idols of our lives, for all that keeps us from the depth of our own being, from contact and connection with life and love, with other people and with the earth. If a renewed, reconstructed Judaism can help us advance our capacity to root out idolatry from the midst of our hearts, I welcome it.

We are presented with a tremendous challenge. We are desperate to act for the best—for ourselves, for our

people, and for the historic trust we have been given. Ultimately, we do not fully understand how civilizations evolve, how we renew our ancient messages, how we live in two civilizations. We are surrounded by multiple possibilities and choice. I hope to heed the voices warning me to respect the integrity of the tradition I have received. I know, too that I am nurtured, healed, enlivened when I step beyond the gates of home and invite into my heart the beauty of spiritual openness, flowing from other doorways. ♦

The Dialogue with the Dalai Lama

BY JOY LEVITT

There is something a little unnerving about reading about yourself in someone else's book. Did I really say those things? Was it really the way the author describes? Despite my discomfort, I devoured Rodger Kamenetz's *The Jew in the Lotus: A Poet's Rediscovery of Jewish Identity in Buddhist India* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1994), staying up all night to finish it in one reading.

The book provides a fascinating inside-look at an extraordinary experience between a small group of Jews and the Dalai Lama. For me, one of the fortunate people to be part of that group, the book has been a spiritual gift, a profound reminder of a time when all my assumptions were blown open, all my insecurities laid bare, and the deepest of my values confirmed.

When the call came with the invitation to join the delegation to the Dalai Lama's temporary residence in India, I thought it was a phoney phone call. "Would you like to travel to northern India at the invitation of the Dalai Lama? His Holiness is interested in learning about Judaism and especially about how the Jews have

survived so long in exile. We are looking for eight Jewish leaders—rabbis and scholars—who would be willing to both teach and learn, to enter into dialogue with the Tibetans."

I spent the better part of that initial conversation trying to convince the organizer, Marc Lieberman, that I was not the right person for this trip. I gave him the names of several other rabbis who had studied Eastern religions, and whose temperament and intellect were better suited for a profound engagement with Buddhism. Not for one minute did I have any intention of saying yes. I had a full-time job and two small children. There was no reason to do this.

I decided to speak with Yitz and Blu Greenberg, Orthodox Jewish leaders who had recommended that Marc call me, to find out why they had agreed to go. Blu was direct. "Well, of course, it's an adventure. But mainly I'm going because the Dalai Lama has been one of the very few major religious leaders who has spoken out positively about the Jewish State and its right to exist. I feel it is important for the Dalai Lama to meet

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Jews and to feel our empathy for the plight of his exiled people. Yitz really believes that we have something to offer the Tibetans, that our experience in exile can be useful to their survival in diaspora.”

These were compelling reasons to go. They were about politics and reaching out to one in need. I decided to go, pushing aside my substantial concerns about travel in India and my ignorance about the culture and religion of Tibetan Buddhism. Although Marc had emphasized that this was to be a dialogue, I had little expectation of learning too much or in any way changing as a result of the encounter. I was a teacher, a representative of Judaism, offering the benefit of our historical experience. It would be, as Blu said, an adventure.

What I remember most about the experience, years later, was my strong sense of loneliness. Not for twenty years or more had virtually all my relationships been unavailable to me. Thousands and thousands of geographic and spiritual miles from my family and congregation, I seemed to stop being a wife, a mother, even a rabbi. After twenty hours of flying from New York to New Delhi, followed by a hair-raising fifteen hour drive, some of which traversed through the war-torn Punjab, I felt stripped of all my identities. About halfway up to Dharamsala, travelling along seemingly non-existent roads amidst burning cars and rioting students, I realized, perhaps for the first time in my life, that I wasn't in control of anything at all. I remember

thinking as we passed through checkpoint after checkpoint that it was possible I wouldn't live through this. Why had I agreed to take this journey? Did I really believe I had something to say to the leader of Tibetan Buddhism, a religion about which I knew virtually nothing? Did I think even for a moment His Holiness had something to teach me?

Letting Go

Letting go of the need to answer that and many more questions was one of the hardest and most liberating processes I had to undergo in order to make this trip more than just something I had done. The details that formed the shape of my life in New York—arrangements, schedules, phone calls—and the inherent sense of safety and security that such obsession with control and organization brings had to be abandoned. We would arrive when we arrived. We would teach what we could and learn what we could be open to learning. It would be whatever we made of it.

Before we were to meet with His Holiness, the lamas, and other Tibetan monks and nuns, we had to meet one another, in prayer, over meals, in study, and in the endless planning meetings where we decided how to approach a given issue in our encounter with the Buddhists. The group's diversity—a great advantage to the Buddhists—was a tremendous challenge for those of us who were task-oriented. The simplest issues, such as who would lead morning services, became difficult, as issues of

egalitarianism and Orthodoxy collided in ways that I had long since resolved. But here in Dharamsala, we were eight men and three women—one more than necessary for me and two less than required for Yitz Greenberg. The fact that the two organizers of the trip, Buddhist men of Jewish origin, could save the day reminded me that you could go literally to the ends of the earth and still not resolve the thorny issues confronting Jewish unity at the end of this century.

Travelling in caravan to Dharamsala, we had agreed to meet at a small restaurant in Karnal. One car was late, and we were eating when it finally pulled up. I had assumed that they had had car trouble (it seemed that every Indian on the road had car trouble). Actually, Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, one of the members of the group, had spotted a Sikh Temple on the side of the road and he convinced the driver to stop so he could meet the Sikh Priest and daven *ma'ariv* in the Temple. The encounter clearly energized Zalman, who somehow managed to connect with the Sikh religious leader, despite language and religious barriers. I could feel a split in the group taking form—those who were eager to hear more about Zalman's experience and those who were uncomfortable with what Zalman had done. Kamenetz writes that he was "electrified by his joyous crossing of boundaries, his davening chutzpah. It broke through all my neat categories....I was conscious of the theatricality of the gesture, but that didn't diminish the effect. This was my fan-

tasy of what Jewish renewal might look like." It didn't look like Jewish renewal to me. At the time of our dinner in Karnal, as I watched the twinkle in Zalman's eyes as he described his conversation and prayer with the Sikh Priest, my anxiety increased. Now I was not only worried about my physical safety but also my spiritual security.

Dialogue Works Both Ways

There would be more such boundary crossings as we planned our time together with the monks and lamas and finally with the Dalai Lama, each of which Kamenetz recounts with accuracy and sensitivity. Each episode challenged us, both as individuals and as a group, whether it was trying to decide if it was appropriate for Jews to refer to the Dalai Lama by his accepted title of His Holiness, or whether we should, as protocol suggested, bow slightly upon greeting the Dalai Lama.

The result of the dialogue, even with its boundary crossings (on both sides, I might add), was to reconfirm our deep appreciation for the tradition we carry. This appreciation was first manifest for me when we recited the grace after meals following a Shabbat dinner. The Tibetans became very moved upon learning that Jews pray for the rebuilding of Jerusalem after meals in their homes. They immediately made plans to see if they might write a Tibetan prayer articulating their yearning for Lhasa. I was stunned by the new light suddenly cast on this very familiar prayer. I have

recited grace after meals on Shabbat my entire life, and yet had never really grasped its role in preserving the Zionist dream in the hearts and minds of Jews throughout the generations. Since my return from India, I have never recited those words without thinking both of the Tibetans and of my deep longing for Zion at peace.

Our main purpose in travelling to Dharamsala was to teach the tools of Jewish survival, which each of us did in turn, choosing from a variety of different subjects, from pluralism to the Jewish Family to Kabbalah to the institution of the synagogue. For an hour at a time, the Dalai Lama listened with an intensity that comes from several hours of meditation each day. More than any other single attribute (including his charming sense of humor, his remarkable humility, and his simple acts of kindness), it was his manner of listening that overwhelmed me. The Jewish art of dialogue, at least as I have understood it, involves thinking of what you're going to say when the other person finishes talking, which he rarely gets to do, because usually you interrupt him. I had never experienced the kind of deep listening that the Tibetans practice, and I noticed that it changed the way we spoke. I found myself wanting to say exactly what I meant, speaking more carefully because I knew that each word would be heard and appreciated. It was an amazing lesson to learn, though hard to implement back home without the meditation skills (and community support) that such listening requires.

We had also been challenged to look critically at Judaism through both the eyes of the Tibetans and those of the Jews who had found their home within the Tibetan Buddhist community. In our encounters with Buddhists of Jewish origin as well as with JUBUS (those who straddle both worlds, or try to), it was difficult to ignore the dimension of spiritual deficiency they experienced in Jewish life. It was not always clear why some of us had found fulfillment in Jewish life, while for others it was totally absent. But it was clear that in many cases access to Jewish tradition and its richness had been (and continues to be) severely impeded by narrow-minded, inadequate, and superficial education. While none of us had to travel thousands of miles from home to learn this, it was nevertheless a painful truth to hear from the Buddhists.

Unpacking the Tradition

I had chosen to speak about the synagogue as a response to diaspora fragmentation. I was aware that the Tibetan Buddhists had no such similar institution of communal prayer and study, and felt it important for them to understand this primary diaspora center, which had developed largely as a response to Jewish exile. As I began to talk, presenting the Dalai Lama with a book the children of our synagogue had prepared for him describing our synagogue, it felt as if I were hearing this all for the first time. Listening to myself through the Tibetans' ears, realizing how remarkable the synagogue has been (and

could be) in the life of the Jews, I felt a deep sense of privilege to be part of the Jewish people. I became energized about my rabbinate, eager to get home and reexamine what we did in the synagogue through the new lens of the Tibetans.

I believe that the Dalai Lama found each of our talks useful and interesting. For me, they were transforming. Though we didn't even scratch the surface of Jewish history, tradition, culture, or practice, we had begun to unpack some of the essence that formed the substance of our survival. In so doing, we had helped another community and felt a deep sense of awe at our own tradition and its richness.

Nowhere was this more obvious to me than in our last hour in India, which we spent at the synagogue in

New Delhi. I entered the synagogue with some trepidation. I was exhausted from the trip south and thoroughly shaken from the overwhelming poverty in Dehli. No theology exists to adequately explain my good fortune in life, as it compared to the horrendous way these people lived. The last thing I wanted to do was go to *shul*. But almost from the moment we walked into the building, we were embraced by the community's leader and began to daven. I closed my eyes and entered my history, the words of my ancestors, my words, my prayers. I felt connected, comforted, perhaps even a little less lonely. We sang every Jewish song, danced every Jewish dance. And we recited a collective *shehehyanu*, acknowledging our gratitude for our lives and the tradition that ennoble us. ♦

Can *Halakhah* Live?

BY EDWARD FELD

Anouncing that Torah is a human document proclaims the new age. The consequence is understood by contemporary liberal Jews: the choices are ours—let each person do what feels right for him or herself. But we ask: if we no longer believe in a supernatural God, if we no longer conceptualize a time when God spoke the commandments, has Torah lost all meaning?

Kaplan referred to the Torah as the childhood diary of the Jewish people, a memory of where we had come from. If you throw out the diary you lose a sense of yourself, but you ought not guide yourself by your childhood diary either. Adults ought to make their own decisions. This attitude toward Torah is the product of a progressivist modernism that trivialized the past. Kaplan needed to reduce the past in order to reconstruct the whole system and justify the changes he sought to impose. I would argue that Kaplan's followers similarly feel themselves too easily masters of their past.

The contemporary theologian Neil Gillman talks about the ritual of listening to the Torah as containing within it the possibility of suspending disbelief and experiencing Sinai again,

if only for a moment. The Torah is read and we can feel called. Externalizing the myth allows us to dress ourselves in an ancient time, to again hear the word and be addressed by it. We come to believe that there may be something serious here that we wish to incorporate in our lives. There are times, especially after a good Torah discussion, when we can believe in the spiritual power of Torah, its ability to cross the temporal divide, touch on issues that are at the core of our being, and provide us with a vocabulary, a set of stories, a path that can illuminate our own search for a spiritual center. At such moments, Torah becomes a calling.

We Are Post-Modern

Rather than starting with the Enlightenment conceit—that the ancients were primitive, that the new is blessed, and that all thinking can begin again with us, we understand the paltriness of our being. We come after the great shocks of the twentieth century, in which we learned: that culture and enlightenment might lead to the destruction of humanity; that we can hardly trust our own motives, let alone the motives of whole societies;

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that we hide truths from ourselves as much as we disclose them; that civilization does not simply progress, but that ideas forgotten and discarded can take on new life and continue to instruct us.

Architects who championed the modernist style suppressed the history of building and, while they may have created objects of beauty, frequently also built structures that brutalized humans. Musicians who set out to create a new tonal system lost touch with what the West had learned the human ear could contain, and so, while their discoveries may be valuable, it is inevitable that what has followed has reintegrated contemporary music into the classical tradition. Frequently in this century, the plastic arts forgot how to provide insight into who we humans are, and so now they are turning toward themes and projects that just a few years ago were thought to have been forsaken forever. All these disciplines have learned to turn once again to their own history for instruction: they have become post-modern.

Is it not so with us as well? In realizing the paltriness of our existence, do we not find the need to be instructed by our own past efforts at spiritual striving?

Our Need to be Called

In the past, we were instructed by listening and hearing the call from outside ourselves. Has that quality been lost to us? Outside, inside: Samuel never knew where it was coming from, wondering if it were Eli's

voice that he heard. Elijah, returning to Sinai, learns that the voice of God is not thunderous, but pregnant silence. No voice outside ourselves may speak, yet we feel called. You may hear within Torah a soundless speaking: a still small voice has clothed itself and become word.

The otherness that has the power to address us, which can call to us and command us, is no longer a part of our spiritual life. We might talk of "the Ground of Being," "the Power that makes for Salvation," "the unity of life," but these are not metaphors that have the power of speech. These are abstract understandings of the forces of existence. Yet how plain and empty our lives without living metaphors that reverberate across time! We experience something missing: not simply the penalty of aloneness, of having grown up and left the parental home, but that a reality of our inner being ceases to be addressed. Amidst our day-to-day existence, the calling, a soundless voice that rustles in the heart of our soul, demands embodiment in our lives, needs to be spoken.

We must speak some language, and because we are Jews, we speak our inherited Torah. Understanding the need for a vocabulary of holiness, we open ourselves to the tradition. Torah always mined the meeting place of the life of care, of responsiveness, of relatedness, of love and the realities of the lived life. We understand our desire to be instructed in these precious aspects of experience. We seek a vocabulary that includes these realms in the lan-

guage of life, so that we can speak more than can be spoken in the harsh slang of daily existence. Our humanity depends on our adherence to a system that inspires us to a greater ethos than the survival of the fittest. And so we hear the Torah read with great expectation. Sometimes it inspires, sometimes it disappoints.

The Grammar of Jewish Language

The language of Judaism has its own grammar, etymologies, and peculiar modes of expression. If you would learn how to speak Jewishly you must learn the language. If you would become a poet, a playwright, a teller of Jewish religious tales, you must immerse yourself in the textual fabric of Judaism. If you wish to speak with a deep Jewish voice and have your Jewish song reverberate, then you must understand how to enunciate Jewish words.

The modernist conceit is that we are cut off from the past, that we must start speaking a new language: modernism. Science, Enlightenment, democracy have created new conditions for thinking, and so, beginning with Descartes, the modernist conceit is perpetrated: each of us recreates the world, each of us derives the postulates of existence, *de novo*. But we are never born afresh. Our languages speak millennia of prehistory. If we defy that truth, if we leave a baby in the forest to discover himself, herself, then all the child grows into is a "wolfman," incapable of being truly human. To be a true self one has to be

civilized—inculcated into society.

Those with religious commitments understand that religious emotions are part of the fullness of life's experience. Attending to the world with wonder and awe, experiencing the gifts of life, developing a sense of obligation and moral concern, knowing the interrelationship of all existence, cultivating tenderness and care—these, among others, constitute the mental life of the faithful. To be religious, one has to learn the vocabulary of holiness, which involves more than simply feeling inspired. One must also live one's life, and as soon as the problems of life are faced, one realizes the need for a discipline to get one through the everyday. And so we turn to the tradition for a religious vocabulary to inspire life.

Judaism has come to understand that holiness does not so much reside in the momentary insight, but in the lived life. In this view, sin is not bad thought, but bad action, and good is not right thinking, so much as right behavior. One might carry this too far: it is not that Judaism has nothing to say about right thinking, that it has no views about the nature of the world, God, humans, and their interrelationship. Rather, one cannot be seen as having gotten any of that right if one's behavior is all wrong. Thought is the grammar of life. To think about how we should behave is not to fall from the world of holiness, the pure contemplation of God, but rather to live the life of holiness in its everpresent form.

Halakhah—Inevitable Jewish Language

The meaning of *halakhah* is that ideas count. There is not something called Judaism and something else called the law. Judaism has had no separation between saints and church fathers. The most sensitive religious elite always shaped the way Jews lived through *halakhah*. Our spiritual heroes are Hillel, Akiva and Maimonides, thinkers, actors on the political stage and critical shapers of the legal tradition. Even when we were led by mystics who were less adept at halakhic argument, these leaders did not see themselves as opposed to the halakhic community, but rather as contributing to it.¹

And so we come back again to the modern break with tradition. Do we live in a post-halakhic world? To argue that we are nurtured by all Jewish literary sources except the legal ones is to study Judaism wearing broken glasses. If we are to be addressed by the language of tradition, why should we exclude this one form of the tradition? Moreover, to ignore halakhah is to misconstrue Judaism's own self-understanding in all its previous manifestations. Not to understand Judaism as concretized in acts, ritual acts and acts performed between one person and another, between the human and the world, is to distort Judaism. To act correctly, to meet the world in holiness is to evoke the God of existence.

Language is not static. New dictionaries are constantly issued. *Halakhah* is not given; it is not The Way, the final

map, but rather, the road that we build as we hack through the forest of existence. Codification is but one of the genres of halakhic literature. Commentaries are another genre, talmudic argument yet another. Some periods of Jewish history gave apodictic responses to questions of law; others interwove law and narrative, and allowed plural voices to speak without giving single answers; still others responded to the questions of life with *Teyku*—putting off a final answer to a distant messianic age. Different ages have found it necessary to address their everyday concerns with different voices.

We no longer speak to a unified Jewish people who make common assumptions about the nature of the religious life. We live in a world with a far more autonomous sense of self than our ancestors had. We never allow the tradition that authority which could unquestioningly rule over our lives. Liberal Jews, who in every other area of their lives make choices, must feel personally addressed by the tradition and convinced of the necessity of a life that is open to Torah.

But having opened ourselves to instruction through the words of Torah, do we not recognize the need for a language continuous with what has gone before? For if not, what use is there to Judaism? Do we not look to Judaism to provide us an alternative vocabulary to the mistakes of contemporary civilization? Do we not seek to discover in it a discipline for our lives and a language that can give voice to our inner religious hunger?

To address us in these compelling ways, does not Judaism need to have a quality of *otherness*, so it can give us something more than that which we bring to it? Judaism must be able to address us, to teach us to be different from whom we have become; otherwise, it is not worthwhile. If Judaism is to have the power to speak to us, it must maintain its own internal integrity. Can we imagine a Judaism without Shabbat? A Judaism without a cycle of festivals? A Judaism without some regulation of our daily patterns of eating? A Judaism without something to say about the way we engage in all our relationships? If Judaism cannot address these things, if Judaism cannot be felt in the everyday and the celebratory moment, then surely it has lost its inner power.

Public and Private Decision-Making

The law remains most powerful in establishing public, social matrices. Individuals do not establish calendars; societies do, and, insofar as we choose to subject ourselves to the tradition, we will recognize the spring as a time for tasting matzoh and the fall as a time for sitting in huts. One may choose to observe or not, but surely one has not engaged Judaism by eating matzoh in the fall. There is an integrity to Jewish life and symbols that an individual may not violate without having stepped outside the sensibility of the tradition.

While individuals may not want to keep kosher, and it may be that noone in the congregation keeps a kosher

home, yet serving shrimp at a synagogue function is, as the Rabbis said of other matters, as if one tried to purify oneself in a ritual bath while holding a dead rat. In public matters, the tradition must maintain a greater internal cohesion than in our individual decision-making. Similarly, issues of status are not established individually, but are functions of social constraint. A person who is not Jewish cannot simply decide that he or she is Jewish; the community has to recognize that person. Such standards of decision-making are integral to Jewish life.

We may talk of a ladder of holiness, of levels of observance; we may speak about our need to hear the call of the tradition before it addresses us as command. These are contemporary ways of trying to relate to a tradition that we no longer accept unquestioningly. But we also recognize that if the tradition is not allowed its own voice in the dialogue, then we reduce it to an authentication of our own modern liberalism and we ought not to be surprised when others find consulting it superfluous. We may choose to accept or reject the tradition, but in our hopes to transform it, we must respect its integrity. We need to preserve the inherited past, for if we do not, it will not be there to recover, when modes of existence, fashions shift.

The critical exception to this principle is that which becomes so morally repugnant that it cannot be contained any longer. While Jews may always have treated women better than the surrounding societies did, it is impossible for today's men and

women still to be constrained in their gender roles in the way the tradition found normative. Our contemporary internal moral voice is stronger than any fragment of our past contradicting it.

We do not want Judaism to be only represented by its past. A living Judaism is growing and changing. In every era, engagement with the tradition is dialectical—we both listen to its voice and shape its meaning. Interpretation is an ongoing activity. How do we maintain our balance on the high wire, not falling too deeply into either side of the dialectic, i.e., neither giving the tradition such weight that our own voices are suppressed, nor being so self-absorbed that we cease to hear the voice of the other, the voice of the “beloved” addressing us?

Objectifying the Tradition

Decision-making involves an objectification of the tradition—listening to its demands and its internal logic, respecting and stating its self-understanding. To be sure, such objectification involves a kind of splitting off of the subjective person making the decision. The tradition was created by people: why should they have any greater authority than anyone living today? Should we not think of ourselves as continuous in the process of decision-making?

Nevertheless, at the outset, one grants to the tradition the voice of otherness; we hear a voice speaking within it, with which we are in dialogue. It is not that the tradition sits in our midst merely with a vote, as

Kaplan claimed, one voice among many, but rather that the tradition is our conversational partner, the ‘other’ with whom we are inevitably engaged.

Midrashic interpretations can be infinite; halakhic ones result in a single outcome. All halakhic decisions are therefore deep readings of the tradition in which its inner meaning is disclosed. True inner meaning is only found through objective behavior.

A rabbi exemplifying the decision-making process within his or her congregation constitutes for a moment the objectified voice of the tradition. Hearing the rabbi respond to a halakhic question as teacher, as interpreter of the received text, one confronts the manifestation of the inner voice of the tradition. To be sure, the rabbinic voice is always interpretive, and therefore must be engaged in all her subjective humanness. But the objectification of the tradition that has taken place allows for the conversation to move forward. In her role as rabbi, the speaker is more than herself. The rabbi achieves this role when the congregation grants him this power to decide. If the congregation refuses to listen to his voice, then all he has enunciated is the dead letter of the law.

Saying Yes and Saying No

There are moments when the rabbi, enunciating a decision to his or her congregation or to the person facing the rabbi with a question, finds the tradition saying “yes.” Such a moment can be like a revelation, a

conjunction of one's own inner voice and the speaking of the "other." The rightness of the "yes" is the confirmation of the inner self.

At other times the enunciated answer is a "no." Here, something more complicated happens: the hearing of the "no" may issue in a realization of the need to separate from contemporary culture. Meaning is discovered in the affirmation, but definition does not take place until the moment of nay-saying. Jewish difference is discovered in this nay-saying—this moment of self-discipline and puritanical assertion.

Kaplan thought that what needed to be emphasized was Judaism's positive side, its links with the contemporary world. He found Judaism saying "yes" to socialism, to democracy, to equality. But our spiritual search involves us in the discovery of an alternative to the contemporary secular, frequently pagan, world. Our Judaism also needs nay-saying to be revelatory. Those engaged in outreach speak to people who, for the most part, are not ready to listen to the nay-saying of Judaism, but instead seek in Judaism a confirmation of their lives. It becomes easy in such a community to say "yes" to everything, harder to delineate the impermissible. Yet without restraint, such communities lose sight of the special ways in which Judaism differentiates itself.

Can Reconstructionism Say "No"?

In the twenty-five years since Reconstructionism severed its links with the Conservative movement, it has ceased

to be responsive to the coherence of the tradition, and instead has become a havurah-style Reform Judaism, in which all is possible and each person and congregation decide for themselves the content of Judaism. Judaism becomes a means of self-expression and personal religion, a kind of Protestantism, rather than a collective enterprise with an authentic voice.

Reconstructionism has recently tied itself too closely to a rhetoric of mass democracy, thus negating the possibility that the objectified voice of the tradition can speak to us. Even the American system of governance recognizes the need for a Supreme Court to give voice to the Constitution. We understand that that power does not represent a defeat of democracy, but rather an appropriate self-limitation of the people's power, necessary for upholding the integrity of the system. If everything is reduced to process, then there is no voice other than ourselves with whom we struggle.

The rhetoric of democracy does not work in Jewish decision-making. A local community cannot vote to do away with Shabbat. If arrangements have been made for special events of the congregation to violate minimal standards of *kasbrut*, then someone ought to be empowered to say, "No!" If the meat and dairy dishes have gotten mixed up in the kitchen, it is not the ritual committee who ought to decide whether this need be attended to or not; the tradition has to be allowed to speak with its own integrity to these issues and votes do not count in such matters.

Similarly, at present, the Reconstructionist movement's high school trip to Israel—organized by the Jewish Agency—includes an extended stay on a non-kosher kibbutz. Decisions in some Reconstructionist congregations are made by members who are not Jewish. And many congregations will accept the children of patrilineal descent as Jewish, even when they were not raised as Jews. All of these are considered matters of local decision-making, for lay leadership and ritual committees to decide. More and more, by losing the power to say "no," Reconstructionism casts aside the revelatory power of Judaism—the ability of the tradition to stun us with its otherness.

Nay-saying is always difficult; it can seem like a quashing of imagination, a denial of freedom, and can therefore be experienced as the disintegration of autonomy. Yet nay-saying can also be experienced as an act of love, when one tries to understand the "yes's" that motivate the "no's." "Thou shalt not kill"—because the human is God's image. "Thou shalt not work on the Sabbath"—because the Sabbath's power of restoration and sense of fulfillment is dependent on rest. "Thou shalt not eat foods that are unfit"—because the body must represent holiness, and holiness is dependent on acts of self-denial.

Our Balancing Act

Liberal Jews have to balance maintaining a coherent tradition and defending skepticism, accepting tradi-

tion and critiquing it, listening to the past and at times rejecting it. We refuse to give up our autonomy, yet we want to place ourselves within a tradition that might shape our lives. The ḥasidic story that one should carry a note in each pocket, one saying, "The world was created for me," the other reminding us, "You are but dust and ashes," is most telling for our situation. We have acquired self-respect—modernity's emphasis on our own internal development—which ought to be celebrated in our autonomous choices. But we have also acquired modesty—our post-modern understanding of our own limited vision at any moment in time—which opens us to religious instruction. If holding onto these polar commitments creates a paradox for our lives, we are willing to live with the tension, for we are quintessentially a people who have inherited a tradition of argument. If we lose sight, however, of the tradition's ability to call to us and confront us with its otherness, then we have lost the spring essential for our inner movement.

Our Judaism is embodied; it is about behavior and action, relatedness and community, as well as thought. Kaplan intuited this in saying that Judaism had to recognize its inherited folkways. Kaplan understood the unique language that Judaism speaks, in which action is central to belief. But folkways are hardly religious imperatives and a generation no longer filled with immigrant nostalgia can hardly base its life on such memories.

We do not live in a post-halakhic age; we should say, rather, that the forces shaping our *halakhah* are different from those of previous eras. There is no alternative for a contemporary Judaism that seeks to concretize its commitments than to recreate the *halakhah*. A Judaism that has given up on *halakhah* ceases to be interesting, for it no longer thinks of Judaism as making a difference. ♦

1. Early Ḥasidism, which Martin Buber depicted as antinomian, was concerned with the kind of knife to be used in ritual slaughtering, the debate over the hours of prayer, and added observances of the festivals and Shabbat. Similarly, Moshe Idel has pointed out that Gershom Scholem could describe the mystics as seeking an alternative to *halakhah* only by ignoring the enormous number of books that mystics wrote explicating the secret meaning of the law.

Authority and Parameters in Jewish Decision-Making

BY NEIL GILLMAN

What is the authority of Torah in our lives? From a theological perspective, the basis for determining the authority of Torah in matters of belief and practice rests on how we understand revelation. Regarding revelation, there are only two possibilities, the traditionalist position and, for want of a better name, the liberal. The traditionalist insists that there is a tight congruence between what God wants us to know of God's will and what the Torah tells us about God's will. The liberal insists that no such congruence exists, that there is a gap between whatever God revealed/reveals and what is recorded in Torah.

Thus Norman Lamm, one of the clearest exponents of the traditionalist position, insists that God "willed that man abide by His commandments and that that will was communicated in discrete words and letters." He continues: "The divine will, if it is to be made known, is sufficiently important for it to be revealed in as direct, unequivocal, and unambiguous a

manner as possible, so that it will be understood by the largest number of the people to whom it is addressed." Hence he accepts "unapologetically the idea of the verbal revelation of the Torah." "To deny that God can make His will clearly known is to impose upon Him a limitation of dumbness that would insult the least of His creatures." Finally, "given the above, it is clear that I regard all of the Torah as binding upon the Jew."¹

In short, if God cares enough to give us the Torah in the first place, we must assume that God has the power to communicate precisely what God wants us to know. To deny this is to deny God's power, in fact, to deny God. For the traditionalist, the criteria for authenticity in Judaism are therefore both halakhic and theological. It follows that halakhically-correct conversions performed by liberal rabbis are not acceptable to a traditionalist Jew, because they follow the *halakhah* for the wrong reasons, i.e. not as revealed by God in discrete words and letters. For this position,

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then, authority in Judaism rests explicitly with God whose will is revealed in the text of Torah.

The Liberal Position

In contrast, as soon as Abraham Heschel writes, “as a report about revelation the Bible itself is a *midrash*,”² he has taken a decisive step out of the traditionalist camp. His further conclusion that “what reached the ear of man was not identical with what has come out of the spirit of the eternal God,”³ that “...Judaism is based upon a minimum of revelation and a maximum of interpretation,”⁴ and that “the source of authority is not the word as given in the text, but Israel’s understanding of the text,”⁵ amply confirm that judgment. If the words of Torah are not God’s words, then they must be human words. There is no middle ground here.

I choose Heschel as representative of the liberal camp, because he is commonly identified with the more traditionalist wing of modern Jewish theologians. Even stronger cases can be made for the liberalism of Franz Rosenzweig and Martin Buber. Rosenzweig claims that “‘He (God) came down [on Sinai]’ (Ex. 19:20)—this already concludes the revelation; ‘He (God) spoke’ is the beginning of interpretation, and certainly ‘I am.’”⁶ And Buber even rejects Rosenzweig’s suggestion that “God is not a Law-giver. But He commands.”⁷

In these statements of the liberal position, the human community does not possess God’s explicit will—in Heschel, because God’s will has to

pass through the screen of human comprehension and language, and in Rosenzweig and Buber, because God does not explicitly reveal God’s will in the first place. In Mordecai Kaplan’s thought, the liberal position reaches its most radical conclusion. For Kaplan, God’s will is thoroughly identified with the human community’s “discovery” of salvational patterns in human beings and in nature.⁸ In short, for Kaplan, God wills whatever the human community says God wills. But in principle, the very same claim could be made for Heschel, Rosenzweig and Buber. In all of these formulations, the human community determines the content of Torah and becomes thereby the locus of authority. That is the distinguishing mark of all liberal theologies of revelation.

This liberal approach to defining authority is also evident in Solomon Schechter, who claims that “it is not the mere revealed Bible that is of first importance to the Jew, but the Bible...as it is interpreted by Tradition.” He continues, “it follows that the center of authority is actually removed from the Bible and placed in some living body, which, by reason of its being in touch with the ideal aspirations and the religious needs of the age, is best able to determine the nature of the Secondary Meaning.” This “living body” is Schechter’s “Catholic Israel”—the consensus shaped by committed Jews in any one generation. Schechter writes that God may have chosen the Torah, Moses and Israel, yet “God’s choice invari-

ably coincides with the wishes of Israel.”⁹ This striking formulation surely helps us understand why, in 1909, Schechter was perfectly comfortable in inviting the young Mordecai Kaplan to teach in his school.

The Human Dimension: Subverting God’s Will

The gap that exists between what God wanted/wants us to have as the text of revelation and what we do indeed have is created by the substantive human contribution to the formulation of Torah. The traditionalist tends to eliminate such a human dimension; the liberal tends to acknowledge or even welcome it. But the issue is more complicated than this simple dichotomy might suggest, because the Torah itself seems to provide a basis for subverting God’s explicit authority over its contents, thus making God’s verbal revelation theoretically irrelevant.

The basis for this subversion lies in a number of texts that I refer to as “the best interest of Judaism” clause, by analogy to “the best interest of baseball” clause in the rules of Major League Baseball, which gives the Commissioner of Baseball the right to make any ruling, if, in his estimation, it promotes “the best interest of baseball.” This authority is granted the Commissioner, however, by the owners of major league baseball teams, who wrote the rules, and retain the right to hire and fire him.

The “best interest of Judaism” is addressed in several passages. Deuteronomy 17:8-11 describes how

difficult cases are to be presented to “the magistrate in charge at the time,” and of the responsibility not to “deviate from the verdict...either to the right or to the left.” Rashi (ad. loc.) emphasizes that we go to the authorities “*in charge at that time*,” even if they are not on the level of previous authorities, for all any generation has to draw upon is the authorities of its own day. The closing words of Exodus 23:2, as interpreted by the rabbis, provide the biblical basis for majority rule in all such judicial proceedings.¹⁰

Even God cannot argue against the rabbinic majority in matters of law. This is the point of the Talmudic story concerning the ritual status of Aknai’s oven. Rabbi Joshua uses the phrase, the Torah “is not in heaven” (Deut. 30:12), to reject God’s verbal intervention on behalf of Rabbi Eliezer in his dispute with the rabbinic court. In this case, God is later reported to have laughed and said, “My children have defeated me.”¹¹

In these celebrated instances, Torah, or, more precisely, God, has granted the rabbinic court the explicit authority to determine how the Torah rules in any specific case. This leads Eliezer Berkovits to conclude that “once the Torah was revealed to the children of Israel, its realization on earth became their responsibility, to be shouldered by human ability and insight....Having left its heavenly abode, it had to be accommodated to the modest cottages of human uncertainty and inadequacy.”¹² And again, “once a Jew accepts the Torah from Sinai, whatever it teaches him in his

search for its meaning and message is the word of God for him....The subjective human element is not to be eliminated from the acceptance of the Torah."¹³ Note that Berkovits deliberately leaves the specifics of revelation and Sinai undefined.

Joel Roth concludes his discussion of this same issue as follows: "The scope of rabbinic authority knows no theoretical bounds. As the sole normative interpreters of the meaning of the Torah, Torah means whatever the rabbis say it means. And to whatever they say it means, in every generation, God agrees, even if, in some 'objective' realm, He disagrees with their interpretation."¹⁴ In another context, Roth concludes, "ultimately, then, it seems incontrovertible that the sages do possess the right to abrogate the Torah both actively and passively,...both temporarily and permanently."¹⁵

What Makes a Rabbi?

The decisive issue, then, is "Who is a sage?" or "Who is a rabbi?" and what qualifications should such an authority possess? Roth concludes that a rabbinic authority must be academically qualified and must possess such nonacademic qualifications as those cited by Maimonides: wisdom, humility, fear of God, hatred of unjust gain, love of truth, respect and an upstanding reputation. Above all the authority must possess *yir'at shamayim*.¹⁶ For Roth, *yir'at shamayim* entails a commitment that the Torah as *grundnorm* (the basic norm grounding the authority of Torah as a whole) is

"the reflection of the word and will of God and that the sages of the Torah are the sole legitimate interpreters of the *grundnorm*....Positing the *grundnorm*, however, does not entail any specific theological stance regarding the manner in which it reflects the word and the will of God."¹⁷ Once again, the specifics of revelation are left open, while the qualifications for becoming an authority are shown to be highly subjective.

Even in the traditionalist camp, the ultimate authority for the system rests with the human community. I insist on "community" here, as opposed to sages and/or rabbis, because authorities are not self-designated. A sage/rabbi receives authority from a community of Jews when it turns to that authority with its questions and is prepared to accept his or her answers and live by them. Seminaries and yeshivot may ordain, but a rabbi becomes a rabbi when a community elects that person to serve as its rabbi and/or turns to that rabbi for instruction. *Empowerment flows from the community to its authority.*

Also required is a fundamental congruence between a community and its authority on the parameters within which decisions on belief and practice will lie. Rare is the authority whose decisions stretch significantly beyond the boundaries his or her community is prepared to accept. Equally rare is the community that turns to an authority whose decisions will stretch its parameters.

A traditionalist response to this analysis would claim that the rabbinic

interpretation of Scripture was itself revealed at Sinai as the Oral Torah, so that, in fact, it is God's authority, not the community's, that lies behind these rulings.¹⁸ It would also claim that this Oral Torah is exhaustively canonized in the Talmud, which is why the talmudic resolution of a halakhic issue has far greater authority than that of a later sage. Thus the talmudic authorities could legislate that we praise God for having commanded us to light the Hanukah candles, though Scripture records no such explicit commandment,¹⁹ whereas many contemporary traditionalists insist that we must not similarly praise God for having commanded us to say the Hallel psalms on Israeli Independence Day. In short, the early authorities could, but we can't.

On the Community Role in Defining Parameters

When the human factor enters our picture of halakhic authority, an element of relativism and subjectivity is inevitable. To put it in another, possibly less gracious way, authority becomes politicized.

Thus, the casual use of the terms, "the *halakhah*" and "the halakhic process" is unfortunate. Each of these phrases implies that there is an *objectively* determined set of parameters which define what is "within" or "outside" the halakhic system, within which all decisions for a community that acknowledges the binding power of *halakhah* must lie. But if the community is the ultimate authority for what constitutes the word and will of

God, it is clear that no such objective set of parameters is even possible. To put this another way, there are no intrinsic parameters, or rather, the parameters are established and continuously set anew as decisions are made by the decisor/community. We can only trace the parameters up to this point; where they fall in the future depends on the next issue to be considered, which is determined consensually by the community and its decisor.

That the subjective model I have presented is empirically the case is obvious among both liberals and traditionalists. The Conservative movement accepts the marriage of a *kohen* and a divorcée, despite Leviticus 21:7, which explicitly forbids such a marriage,²⁰ yet abides by the ruling of Leviticus 18:22 that homosexual relations remain forbidden. Similarly, the supposedly monolithic traditionalist community is riven with subjective disagreement over such issues as the religious legitimacy of the State of Israel, of a secular college education, or of participation with liberal movements in any activity which touches upon halakhic or other religious issues.

It should be clear that there are no intrinsic parameters for decision-making. The community determines the parameters as issues arise. There is nothing surprising, nor particularly upsetting about this pattern. What is disturbing is the attempt to conceal the process by insisting all along that any community is or is not "a halakhic community." That phrase has no clear meaning that I can discern.

Halakhic Innovation

A concrete example. When the groom places a ring on his bride's finger, the traditional liturgy has him recite the formula: "Behold you are consecrated unto me according to the law (ritual? practice?) of Moses and Israel." Today, in a double ring ceremony, the bride customarily says something to the groom as she places the ring on his finger. Frequently, she recites an innocuous passage, such as a verse from the Song of Songs, but in the search for a more egalitarian ritual/liturgy, other couples under rabbinic guidance have used liturgical formulae that more closely approximate what the groom has recited to the bride. Some rabbis now permit the bride to recite the traditional formula, using the masculine form of the Hebrew in place of the feminine.

This is clearly a significant departure from the tradition since it subverts the traditional Jewish understanding of marriage, in which the groom alone is the active partner; he acquires the bride but she is totally passive. It then further offends the tradition by dubbing this new practice as being also "according to the law (ritual/practice) of Moses and Israel" which, the traditionalists insist, is simply not the case.

But the issue is precisely who is "Moses and Israel" here? Whatever Moses's role may have been in transmitting God's revelation to Israel, the fact that the liturgy acknowledges "Israel" as holding an equal role in

determining the content of revelation raises the issue of who is "Israel"? And if we acknowledge that "Israel" represents the community that lives in history, then we have acknowledged the role of our own community as representing "Israel." We then have the authority to claim that this new practice is "according to the law (ritual/practice) of Moses and Israel."²¹

The halakhic process is simply far more fluid and ambiguous than we usually acknowledge. Speaking broadly, American religious Jewry is made up of multiple overlapping halakhic communities ranging from Satmar on the far right to left-wing Reform and even the UJA/Federation "civil religion" community on the far left,²² each with its own authority figure(s). Some of these overlapping communities form coalitions (Reform, Reconstructionist, Conservative, Modern or Centrist Orthodox, Haredi and the rest). These coalitions are more or less stable or fragile, depending on the issue. The ongoing process of shaping the parameters of each community or coalition is inevitably heavily politicized, as it properly should be.

We usually bemoan the fragmentation of the community, but we should not. If anything, the pluralism, fluidity and even the tensions within and among our communities are signs of the vitality of people who care about the issues and are prepared to invest themselves and their energy in shaping them. For this we should be grateful. ♦

1. *The Condition of Jewish Belief: A Symposium by the Editors of Commentary Magazine* (London: Macmillan, 1966), 124-126.
2. Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of Man* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1956), 185.
3. Heschel, 265.
4. Heschel, 274.
5. Heschel, 274.
6. Franz Rosenzweig, *On Jewish Learning*, Nahum N. Glatzer, ed. (New York: Schocken Books, 1955), 118
7. Rosenzweig, 113-114.
8. This particular formulation is Ira Eisenstein's in *The Condition of Jewish Belief*, 46. Kaplan would surely have agreed.
9. Solomon Schechter, "Historical Judaism" in Mordecai Waxman, ed., *Tradition and Change: The Development of Conservative Judaism* (New York: Burning Bush Press, 1958), 94-95.
10. *B. Baba Metzia* 59b.
11. *B. Sanhedrin* 2a.
12. Eliezer Berkovits, *Not in Heaven: The Nature and Function of Halakha* (New York: Ktav, 1983), 73.
13. Berkovits, 51.
14. Joel Roth, *The Halakhic Process: A Systemic Analysis* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1986), 126.
15. Roth, 199.
16. Roth, 144-146.
17. Roth, 151.
18. Significantly, Norman Lamm's discussion of the traditionalist position makes no reference whatsoever to the Oral Torah.
19. *B. Shabbat* 23a. The prooftext invoked is Deut. 17:11 referred to above.
20. *Proceedings of the Rabbinical Assembly*, 1954, 55ff.
21. A case has been made that however misleading this practice may be, it remains halakhically sound as long as the groom's saying and doing precedes the bride's recitation and ritual. In such a view, everything that follows is halakhically irrelevant. Authorities who forbid this practice are concerned about giving the impression that the bride's formula may have halakhic validity.
22. I insist that "civil religion" Jews do form a halakhic community, because they feel obligated to perform a series of *mitzvot*—essentially those related to the health and wellbeing of the Jewish people—even though they may ignore ritual *mitzvot*. They set their parameters as other halakhic communities set theirs.

Boundaries in Reconstructionist Synagogues

BY ADINA NEWBERG

Bet-Or is a fictive Reconstructionist synagogue in a metropolitan area. Many of its members are professionals with hectic careers, busy family lives and other civic and political commitments. The relatively new rabbi noticed that while members would readily participate in a variety of committee meetings, there were difficulties attaining a minyan many Shabbat mornings, and even more so during holiday mornings that fell during the week. The rabbi asked the ritual committee to see if it could find ways of attracting more members to services. After discussion with the membership, the ritual committee suggested that holiday services take place only on the Sunday following the holiday, so that members would not have to miss work.

While the outcome of this hypothetical (and deliberately exaggerated) discussion is not crucial, it illustrates some important issues: What is the process by which the synagogue as a Jewish religious institution decides ritual and liturgical decisions? What is the role of the rabbi in this process?

What is the role of *halakhab* and of Jewish tradition? What would happen if the rabbi opposed the decision of the ritual committee? What could be the basis for such resistance? What sort of process might lead to a final decision?

One way of understanding these questions is to apply social systems theory as a conceptual tool through which we can describe and understand social phenomena. Social systems are composed of smaller systems, generally called subsystems, parts of a larger whole, relating to and influencing each other. Social systems or subsystems are separated from one another by socially-constructed boundaries, which are variable and permeable. A boundary in a social system is a conventional way of constructing and understanding a reality that is constantly changing. Taking a metaphor from linguistics, systems theorists call such variable distinction-making "punctuation."¹

In our example of Bet-Or, there are committees, a school, study and social groups. Each one of these components is a subsystem in the larger syn-

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agogue system;² each has independent functions and definitions, yet each influences the other ones and is influenced by them. Creating the committees, defining the school's functions, and distinguishing between the functions of the synagogue, the school, and the larger Jewish community—all these are punctuation tasks. For example, if the education committee together with the adult education committee create a joint educational program, the boundary between the school and the rest of the synagogue is re-punctuated.

The conscious and unconscious social dynamics of the constituent groups as well as the intentional delineation and punctuation of the boundaries within any system determine the degree to which the boundaries will be permeable. Within each organization there are instances where boundaries are more or less rigid.³

Boundary Permeability

In any synagogue, the definition of membership represents a rigid boundary. There are defined rules regarding membership: one has to pay dues, and one has to be a Jew, or, in Reform or in some Reconstructionist synagogues, the spouse of a Jew. Yet the boundaries are not completely rigid, since there are relatives and friends who are involved in the life of the synagogue without officially being members. Although membership in the Board of Directors is theoretically non-permeable, here too the influence of those "outside" the boundary can extend to those who, for instance, are

friends and associates of members of the Board of Directors.

In contrast to the more rigid boundaries, those delineating membership in committees are more permeable. Members go back and forth in their committee activities, and those who are not official members of committees at times participate in discussions and decision-making, despite their being "outsiders."

Establishing boundaries is necessary for organizations. External boundaries provide a sense of organizational goals and purpose, defining the *raison d'être* of the organization and the ideological tools for maintaining its existence. Internal boundaries between and within various subsystems in the organization permit leadership to emerge and to function and authority structure to be followed. Such boundaries promote established roles and functions for the organizational actors and definite communication channels.⁴ The degree of boundary permeability will reflect the organization's idea of itself as well as the personal and psychological dynamics of its actors.

Examining the extremes of boundary permeability can be a helpful tool. Underboundedness or overboundedness are equally destructive for organizations. Underbounded organizations have neither sense of purpose, appropriate authority structure, nor effective leadership. Overbounded organizations are too authoritarian and monolithic. They create competition between subsystems to satisfy the authorities and to compensate for the

lack of involvement and commitment from members.⁵

If the balance between overboundedness and underboundedness is difficult for most organizations, it is even more so for organizations that hold democracy, pluralism and lack of hierarchy as their espoused principles, as is the case with Reconstructionist congregations. Among the key principles of Reconstructionist synagogues, the most relevant to our discussion is democracy. By democracy, Reconstructionism means that power and responsibility are shared by many. All decisions are made by the whole congregation after a process of study and exploration. When possible a consensus is reached; when necessary a majority vote determines. Rabbis as leaders of the synagogues act as teachers and as facilitators, but not as decision-makers.

Whatever historical authority the past may have for other movements, for Reconstructionists, boundaries are determined in relation to Reconstructionist philosophy—that is, with respect for the tradition and with an understanding of tradition's importance in shaping an evolving religious civilization.⁶ But there are tensions between philosophy and practice. These are illuminated by the concepts of "espoused theory" and "theory in use," as developed by organizational theorists Donald Schon and Chris Argyris.⁷

Espoused Theory and Theory in Use

Organizations have two sets of behavioral guides. One, the espoused theory, comes from the principles and

ideals that define those organizations. The espoused theory points to an image of itself and behaviors that the organization would like to promote. At the same time, due to a variety of conscious and unconscious dynamics, all organizations become engaged in practices and behaviors that are different than the ones espoused, but nevertheless are particular to that organization. Such behaviors constitute the theory in use.

Organizations based on clearly espoused theories, such as Reconstructionist synagogues, have strong boundaries of self-definition. Reconstructionism stands for democracy, equality for women, and respect for the Jewish tradition, and stands against the dictates of *halakhah* in Jewish life.⁸ Yet that same espoused theory rejects the notion of strong boundaries in relation to lines of authority, thereby making room for individuals and their views, concerns not generally respected in organizations with strong self-defining boundaries.

With respect to authority, Reconstructionist synagogues prefer the loose boundaries that are promoted by democratic decision-making processes and by respect for the integrity of the individual's needs. This combination of strong boundedness with respect to group ideology and loose boundedness with respect to individual autonomy is paradoxical. The stronger the boundedness of a system, the stronger its members' sense of the whole and their agreement about the purpose of the system. The weaker the bounded-

ness, as in an organization that promotes democratic involvement in decision-making, the more difficulties exist in agreeing on a whole and its purpose. What establishes Reconstructionist synagogues' sense of purpose is thus also what can cause their diffuseness and lack of agreement.

Tensions/Paradoxes

Similar tensions occur regarding leadership and authority. Reconstructionist synagogues tend to prefer weak boundaries between the religious and lay leadership, but that same principle also brings confusion about role distinctions. The espoused theory calls for learning with the help of religious leaders, drawing from the tradition, and adapting to modern American circumstances through a democratic process. While the democratic process establishes joint learning and decision-making, the rabbi's role is indeed different from that of any other member of the community. As the most knowledgeable person and the one with the contractual responsibility for providing religious leadership, the rabbi has to teach what the tradition considers its ritual boundaries and to lead the way to an appropriate ritual and religious response for that particular synagogue.

The Reconstructionist community values communal decision-making in relation to ritual boundaries, but Reconstructionism also has movement-wide institutions that impinge on and limit those decisions. Theoretically, the community is free to decide what language and format a particular religious event will have, as long as it

respects equality to women, democratic process and commitment to Israel.⁹ Indeed, there is much variety among synagogues in how these principles are respected and carried out. Yet within this boundlessness and freedom to decide, some styles and wordings are preferred to others. Lately, with the publication of the new series of *sid-durim* by the Federation of Reconstructionist Congregations and Havurot, the Reconstructionist movement has provided a model for these stylistic preferences that will greatly influence what Reconstructionism will come to mean for the congregations that use these prayerbooks.

To illustrate the complexity of this paradox, let us imagine briefly that some members of our fictive Bet-Or decide they want to recite the Shabbat morning prayers in Hebrew only. This desire is not contrary to any established Reconstructionist principle, yet it probably would not be accepted, as it runs counter to the evolving understanding of the style and culture of a Reconstructionist service. Having an all-Hebrew service would be considered exclusionary and, therefore, anti-democratic.

Reconstructionist style and culture reflects the theory in use of what Reconstructionism is, rather than its espoused theory. The espoused theory promotes great inclusiveness and openness to innovation, yet the theory in use is more bounded and defined. Innovations and changes are difficult to introduce not necessarily because of resistance to change, but because the process of change is itself so inclusive and therefore complex

and hard to manage. Change means that some members' views would be included and others excluded and perhaps hurt in that process. Resistance to change thus stems from fears of the social dynamics that might result from change. The evolution of this process is determined largely by the dynamic between the rabbi, various subgroups in the community (e.g. feminists, traditionalists, secularists), and the past experiences they have shared around issues of change.

Boundaries in Organizational Life

As we have said, all organizations create boundaries that enable functioning and role distinction. Synagogues establish boundaries between lay leaders and professional leaders by hiring the professionals, writing contracts, job descriptions and work policies. The very terms "lay" and "professional" are a function of the boundaries deemed necessary to the organizational life of the synagogue. Lay leaders hire professionals to fulfill certain functions, whether or not other members have skills to fulfill these same functions. As a consequence, boundaries are maintained between functions that belong to lay leaders and others that belong only to professionals, which seems contrary to the espoused theory of Reconstructionism. Paradoxically, one of the expectations of professionals is that they provide leadership, which means, in many cases, establishing boundaries.

Not only is the synagogue leadership interested in establishing boundaries between lay and professional

leaders, but the professionals are interested in maintaining them too. As long as professionals are employed by those whom they must teach and lead, there is a strong need for boundaries distinguishing the roles and functions of the different parties. Such boundaries ease the task of evaluating the professionals' performance and their relationship to their employers.

Synagogues are structured like many non-profit organizations. Not only are the boundaries between various committees defined, but equally important, there is a clear delineation between what and how decisions are democratically made through committees in charge of such tasks as financial expenditures, hiring and firing paid staff, and the running of particular departments in the synagogue, such as the school. While boundaries are theoretically delineated between various committees as well as between committees and professionals, in many instances, information and power, authority and decision-making can become fused. For example, a member of the education committee who happens also to be chair of the finance committee will have more authority and power in the education committee than other members.

Conversely, those members who are part-time employees of the synagogue are structurally and contractually under the professional's supervision and under the ultimate authority of the responsible committee, but they also participate as volunteers in other committee work. When they participate in such committee work,

they can bring to bear the additional information that comes from their role as employees. The boundaries between paid work and lay work are fused for that person, and thus for the committees and departments to which that person is connected.

The synagogue's structure establishes different roles for lay workers and paid staff, yet in many ways it blurs the expectations it has of the professional with the expectations it has of its members. The paid professionals are expected to have the same (infinite!) level of commitment and loyalty to the organization that volunteer members have, even though their loyalty is directly related to the members'/employers' assessment of their work and ultimately determined by a contract that is usually terminated by the decision-makers.

Not only are expectations toward a rabbi's work blurred, but there is considerable confusion between the private and public domain of the rabbi's life. The rabbi's children and spouse are very visible and scrutinized for many of their actions inside and outside the synagogue walls. To which school does the rabbi send her children? Does her spouse come to services? Where do they eat dinner? Do they keep kosher? Similarly, the boundary between the rabbi's private and professional time is blurred. Not only is every rabbi's time at home always disturbed by work-related phone calls and meetings, but social occasions become professional, and many of the rabbi's "social" events are synagogue or community-related.

Even many of the "private" events take place at times when synagogue members or colleagues are present and work is invariably discussed.

Complex Decision-Making

Given both the ideological and institutional paradoxes of Reconstructionism we have described, it should be evident that decision-making is especially complex in Reconstructionist synagogues. Reconstructionist espoused theory consciously blurs the distinction between professionals and lay leaders. The professional is a spiritual leader, a teacher and guide who facilitates the democratic decision-making process of the synagogue, not its only decision-maker. Yet the professional's relationship with the synagogue is different by virtue of being paid and not having chosen the synagogue as a lay member. The rabbi is not one among equals. The rabbi is an "expert" in Judaism, the "guardian" of the tradition.

This paradox creates an inherent conflict for the rabbi's behavior. The rabbi is primarily hired because of her knowledge and expertise in Judaism. What should be the role of the rabbi, then, when she disagrees with the majority view and sees its decision as detrimental to the continuity of Judaism, for which she feels herself responsible? A rabbi has to avoid creating factions or mobilizing only part of the membership to support her position. She will always be reminded that she is contractually the rabbi of the whole synagogue and has to find a way of being the rabbi to those with

whom she disagrees. She cannot alienate those who think differently by openly fighting their positions.

The theory in use is such that rabbis do not always follow the democratic principles espoused. Rabbis sometimes lead without going through the process of reaching consensus. Style, personality and conviction and the history of the synagogue-rabbi relationship determine what "leading" means for any particular rabbi and community. In some areas of synagogue life, the rabbi may decide to take a stand and fight, in disagreement with the community, while in others he may feel comfortable teaching and guiding, but letting the community as a whole decide. The role and behavior boundaries that exist for the rabbi are not just defined by him, but also by the community that hires or fires him.

What is the process for changing these role boundaries? When Carol, a rabbi in a medium-sized synagogue decided that the Sunday morning breakfast for the Hebrew school could become a rotating responsibility of the parents, they did not see it her way and requested that the breakfast continue to be the rabbi's responsibility. In this example, the rabbi and the community had different interpretations of the rabbi's role and the needs of the community. The ideal solution for achieving better understanding is joint exploration of the issues involved. Yet there are many instances in which even after a process of study, positions do not change. Theoretically, this is the point when the rabbi

should either accept the voice of the majority or resign. In practice, the community often accepts the rabbi's position without agreeing to it, simply because they do not want to lose her or alienate her to a point where it is difficult to work together.

Because contractual and structural boundaries define the rabbi's functioning, the rabbi finds himself living out a paradox. His job description requires him to blur the boundaries between himself and the rest of the congregation, to be democratic and encourage the community to become involved in decisions in which they may not have an interest. At the same time, he has to maintain professional, religious and personal boundaries in order to be inspired and inspiring of others, to be a leader and a teacher as well as an authority figure.

Such paradoxes are inherent in the life of Reconstructionist synagogues. These complex organizations are guided by a strong philosophy that encourages a blurring of boundaries. This same philosophy encourages synagogues to establish and maintain appropriate boundaries, so they can function as strong, healthy organizations. As with all organizations, the theory in use is always different from the theory espoused. By pointing to the discrepancies between the ideal and the reality, this paper aims to narrow that gap and bring theory and practice more in line with one another, so that those involved in Reconstructionist synagogue life can bring it closer to the ideal and also be less frustrated with its daily realities. ♦

1. Bradford Keeney, *Aesthetics of Change* (New York: Guilford Press, 1985), 24-29.
2. Focusing on subsystems should not obscure the fact that the synagogue is itself a system that functions in relation to other systems (educational, political, economic) in its environment.
3. Kenwyn Smith and David Berg, *Paradoxes in Group Life* (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 1987), 102-08.
4. Smith and Berg, 102-08.
5. Smith and Berg, 102-08.
6. Rebecca Alpert and Jacob Staub, *Exploring Judaism: A Reconstructionist Approach* (New York: Reconstructionist Press, 1985), 11-17.
7. See especially Chris Argyris, *Strategy, Change and Defensive Routines* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press), 78-91.
8. Staub and Alpert, 31-32.
9. Federation of Reconstructionist Congregations and Havurot, "By-laws," (1992).

The Rabbi as Gatekeeper

BY ROBERT TABAK

Conversions pose a unique challenge for a Reconstructionist rabbi. He or she must prepare, preside, or decline to lead. Unlike questions of synagogue policy, or changes in liturgy, which may well involve a decision shared with the community, in conversions, the rabbi has to decide. This authority flows from the rabbi's leadership role, from the fact that the rabbi represents the Jewish people and tradition, and from the need for confidentiality, which is in tension with the ideal of communal decision-making in key areas.

While most conversions are non-controversial, some involve key issues of boundaries in Judaism. As a congregational rabbi for more than a dozen years, I was guided by the principle that "there is no mitzvah to convert," derived from the tradition of sending potential converts away three times to see if they are sincere.¹ When people approached me about conversion (especially those with no personal ties to the Jewish community), I had an initial conversation and found out what they knew about Judaism. I explained that conversion was a lengthy process, and that from a Jewish perspective it was not necessary to

be Jewish to be a good person or achieve some sort of "salvation." I suggested several books and asked them to call me when they had read something. If they did some reading and called back, we had the basis for a more serious conversation. If they did not call back, it indicated that they were not ready for a lengthy period of study and new experiences within the Jewish community.²

If most conversions involve a standard set of issues—gaining factual knowledge, building Jewish experiences, spiritual understanding, and an awareness of individual and family concerns—some involve far more. As will be seen in examples drawn from my experience and those of colleagues, the rabbi often has a key role. Most of these examples required a prompt answer, not a study commission. These cases illustrate the importance of boundaries, and the role in which rabbis sometimes find themselves as the Jewish people's gatekeeper.

"Rabbi, We Want Our Baby to Have a Bris—and a Baptism"

Stan and Gloria were members of my congregation. Stan was Jewish, from a very active family. His father had

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been a congregational officer; his sister chaired the synagogue education committee. Gloria was Catholic, and often attended services, holiday programs, and synagogue social activities. However, she had not given up her own faith.

They were expecting their first child, and had spoken to me about a bris/naming ceremony. After the birth of their son, I visited Gloria in the hospital, had a brief discussion, and we set a time a few days later to plan the ceremony. Stan and Gloria had a time conflict, and we ended up only able to meet the night before the circumcision. I discussed the meaning of the *berit* as a sign of Jewish identity, some of the readings, and the fact that since Gloria was not Jewish we would be doing the *berit leshem gerut* (for the sake of conversion). Stan would sign a brief pledge to raise his son as a Jew³ and complete the conversion process by taking him to the *mikvah* when he was older.⁴

Gloria suddenly burst out, "Rabbi, we want our baby to have a bris and a baptism, too." I was flabbergasted. I tried to explain that *berit milah* was an act of identity and affirmation. They wanted to expose the baby to both faiths. Gloria asked whether it would make any difference if the baptism was before or after the bris. I assured her that timing was not the issue. "You can not have a bris one day and a baptism the next." I did not know how I could participate under such circumstances. We parted with all three of us almost in tears.

I spoke to the local doctor who acted as *mohel*. He would follow my

lead. I had three options: a) show up and perform the ceremony, knowing it lacked integrity; b) neither the *mohel* nor I would attend the scheduled bris and it would be canceled; c) we could attend, but not hold any Jewish ceremony.

Officiating was impossible for me, because my role as rabbi would not be sincere in welcoming this child to the people of Abraham. Not showing up at all offered the greatest integrity, and avoided setting a precedent in the community with which I or my successors might later have to deal. But it was too late to call all the guests and cancel. They would show up and have to be turned away. Attending without officiating allowed for ambiguity. Friends would gather to celebrate. I would be physically present to offer support to a congregant. The doctor would perform a medical circumcision in a side room. There would be no prayers, no speeches, no Hebrew name. On the one hand, this would avoid the sin of *malbin panim berabim*, of embarrassing the family publicly. On the other hand, there was the principle of avoiding *ma'arit ayin*, the public impression of accepting or performing a sin, even if one did not occur. Would people mistakenly think later on that this rabbi accepted the idea that one could have both a *berit* and a baptism?

I chose to be present but silent among the dozens attending a non-*berit* medical circumcision and social gathering. To some degree, my strategy failed. Not a single guest asked me or the doctor why there were no

prayers, no explanation of the Hebrew name. Perhaps they assumed it had all taken place privately. In retrospect, I saw that the key perception was my presence (and that of the doctor/*mohel*) as communal representative, as rabbi. The gatekeeper's presence overshadowed the question of liturgy, or its complete absence. I hope that my difficult decision to attend kept doors open for Stan and Gloria's family and preserved some of their dignity. I felt, however, as if I had lessened my own integrity, and possibly that of the Jewish community. I am not certain that I made the correct decision, or would make the same choice today.⁵

The Isolated Convert

It is an important principle of Judaism that Jews are religious in community, not solely as individuals. An episode of TV's "Northern Exposure" on this theme featured a futile search for a minyan in the fictional Alaskan town. Should a rabbi perform a conversion for someone who lives in a town with no other Jews, no synagogue, no role models?

Janice was a teacher who lived in an isolated town in Oregon, with no Jewish community. She had read widely about religion and Judaism and had visited Israel. My community, 200 miles away, was the closest one with a rabbi. I provided her with reading material, met with her on several visits to my city, arranged for home hospitality.

Should I accept her as a candidate for conversion, as she wished? I decided I could help her study, but I could

not sponsor a conversion for someone who could not have ongoing ties with a real Jewish community. Judaism encompasses God, Torah, and Israel. Janice could accept God, and learn about Torah, but Israel is both a real and a spiritual community. I did not feel that I could help "create" a Jew whose ties to other Jews would be limited to a few weekend visits a year.

One of my colleagues faced with a similar situation made a different decision. Sharon was from a small town in Washington state, 150 miles from the nearest synagogue. He told her that he could only convert her if she would move to Seattle for at least six months, take an active part in the ongoing life of the congregation, and study. He thought this would dissuade her. Instead, she arranged for childcare, rented an apartment, and lived in the city for six months. She studied and experienced Judaism for half a year, completed her conversion, and returned to her isolated town. On a visit she made to my congregation shortly thereafter, we welcomed Sharon with an *aliyah* to the Torah.

"Rabbi, Don't Convert My Wife," or, Helped by *Halakhah*

Lauren was a single woman in her twenties who had a longstanding interest in Judaism. She studied as part of my basic Judaism class. We had a target date for her conversion to take place in February. I noted that Lauren was sometimes sitting with Barak, an Israeli college student, at a service or an event. In December, Lauren quietly told me that she and

Barak had just gotten married in a civil ceremony, and that they could have a religious ceremony later. Their marriage, she explained, would help Barak get his "green card" for immigration purposes sooner.

A few months later, I was sitting with two laypeople from the congregation in the synagogue library as part of a *bet din* for conversion. (This generally occurs when there are no other rabbis in a community.) Lauren had completed her studies, shared in the holidays, and made a trip of 350 miles each way to the closest *mikvah* that welcomed converts. We were meeting with Lauren after talking to several other candidates. This was not a "test," but an opportunity to let the candidates say something about what had attracted them to Judaism and what else they thought they needed to learn. In the middle of our short meeting, there was a knock on the door. It was Barak. I stepped out in the hall, and he said, "Rabbi, don't convert her. She's not worthy! I'm not that religious, but I know what being Jewish means and Lauren is not sincere." With that, Barak left the building.

I was upset when I went back into the library. I asked Lauren to step out and my two congregants and I discussed the situation. Lauren was waiting for the ceremony marking the completion of her years of interest and study. She did not know precisely what Barak had said. I did not have the time to research the matter deeply. To send her home would itself have been painful. It explained that two halakhic principles were

involved: the judge/s must decide on the basis of evidence (not on conjecture or rumor); and the evidence of a relative or someone with a prejudicial interest, someone *noge'a badavar*, must be disregarded.⁶ Using this framework, we decided that Lauren herself was sincere and committed, and that Barak's comments should be dismissed. Lauren re-entered and we completed our conversation. A few minutes later, Lauren stood before the ark in the chapel, joyfully accepting Judaism and her Hebrew name of Leah.

Of course, one need not be Ann Landers to see that this marriage was in trouble. We never got around to the Jewish wedding ceremony. A few months later, Barak, green card in hand, suddenly left Lauren and our community with no forwarding address. His charge against Lauren's insincerity seems, in retrospect, to have been a projection of his own.

This was a case where a *bet din* actually had to make a decision. The rabbi guided the decision, and used halakhic categories to assess a human being and her readiness to embrace Judaism. The members served as sounding boards and co-participants. The rabbi had prepared the candidate, knew her best, and could put this sudden request in a both a personal and halakhic framework. A consensus was reached, but had there been a conflict, the rabbi had a negative veto. The conversion could proceed (at another date) with other laypeople if necessary. It could not proceed, however, without a rabbi.

“How Can You Tell Me to Live as a Jew?”

Bill had an abiding interest in religion. He had begun a serious study of Judaism several years ago, and would often join his wife Helene and their two children as a member of our congregation. Bill had almost completed his Jewish studies, and was looking forward to his conversion ceremony. Suddenly, his marriage was coming apart. Bill told me he was having an affair with Karen, a single, non-Jewish friend of the family. He told me that he still loved Helene, but loved Karen too. Bill wanted to put his life back together. He wanted to convert immediately. He wanted to be spiritually whole, to be renewed.

In our conversation, I began to fathom that what Bill wanted was a simultaneous relationship with both women. I asked him if what he wanted was to be like the biblical Jacob, married to both Rachel and Leah. He struggled to say no—but it wasn't clear he meant it. It was clear that what he desperately wanted was the conversion ceremony—immediately, if possible. I referred Bill for counseling.

Did what Bill believe and intend to practice make a difference in whether I converted him? He clearly had left behind the faith of his birth. While what he wanted seemed a fantasy, what if he could work out an “arrangement” with both Helene and Karen? What if, after all his study, he were working out a definition of Judaism quite at variance with my own, or that of my congregation? As a liberal rabbi, did I not encourage thoughtful deci-

sion-making and an awareness of many Jewish possibilities?

Were I an Orthodox Jew, it would be clear that a convert would have to be committed to the entire traditional *mitzvah* system.⁷ As a liberal rabbi, I expect some serious level of ritual practice, some wrestling with *kashrut* and Shabbat, but I do not expect complete traditional observance. But moral obligation is central in my definition of Judaism. Bill's behavior made me reluctant to go through with his conversion.

Guidance from the Talmud

In this difficult process, I found guidance in several stories about Hillel in the Talmud (*B. Shabbat 31a*). In addition to the famous story about the gentile who asks to be taught the entire Torah while standing on one foot, this page contains two other illuminating stories about Hillel and converts. In the first, a gentile comes to Shammai and asks how many Torahs Jews have. Shammai, in good rabbinic fashion, answers two (the written and the oral). The gentile asks to convert on condition that he accept only the written Torah, the Bible. Shammai drives him away. He then goes to Hillel, who converts him, and begins his lessons teaching him the *alef-bet*. This letter is an *alef, bet, gimel*. The next day the man returns for his second lesson. Hillel points to the same letters and says this is a *shin*, this, a *tav*, this, a *resh*. The convert is perplexed. “My teacher, yesterday it was completely different.” Hillel said, “If you are dependent on your teacher for even

the letters, how much more so for the interpretation of Torah.”

The second talmudic story concerns a gentile who, passing by the house of study, hears a description of the elaborate clothing and headgear of the high priest. Hearing the description, he thinks, “I want an outfit like that.” He goes to Hillel, and asks to be converted on the condition that he become the high priest. Hillel accepts him, and sends him to study. The new convert learns a law saying a “stranger” cannot approach the altar. He asks who that is, and is informed that even King David is not qualified to be high priest. It dawns on him that he too cannot be high priest, a position limited to the hereditary class of *kohanim*. By this time, however, he loves Judaism and thanks Hillel for bringing him in.

The insight I derived from these tales and their legal offshoots⁴ is that we may not convert someone who has a completely idiosyncratic definition of Judaism—for example, someone who only accepted the Hebrew Bible, but none of the rabbinic developments of the last two millenia, or one who was fascinated by the dream of a restored sacrificial system in Jerusalem.

I restudied the *takanah* of Rabbenu Gershom, a decree from around 1000 c.e. that codified the practice of Ashkenazic Jewry that a man can have only one wife. For almost a thousand years, this decree has been universally accepted by Ashkenazic Jews. I reached the decision that I could not convert a person to become a Karaite

or a biblical Jew or a Yemenite Jew of 1947 (some maintained their pre-existing polygamous relationships after they emigrated to Israel). I could only convert someone to be a twentieth-century American Jew. Until he worked out other important issues, I put Bill’s conversion on hold.

From these examples we can learn several things. The liminal or transitional experiences of life, including adopting a new religious identity, can produce a number of stresses. Even in liberal and participatory communities, the rabbi plays a key role as teacher and guide. The rabbi has the responsibility to serve as gatekeeper and the authority, particularly in marginal cases, to serve as the representative of Jewish tradition and peoplehood. Finally, the halakhic norms and aggadic insights of our tradition can be of significant value in making decisions, particularly on such a troubling question as to whether or not we should validate a particular person’s request to join *Am Yisrael* by coming “under the wings of the *Shekhinah* (the Divine Presence).”

1. Statement of Rabbi Sol Cohen, my teacher at RRC. The *mitzvah* of warmly receiving the person who has converted (see RRA Guidelines on Conversion, 1979) does not presuppose for traditional, and, I would argue, for liberal Jews, that we should seek out or even accept every person who might conceivably consider converting to Judaism. Basic talmudic laws on this subject are summarized in tractate *Gerim* (Hebrew and English edition), *Seven Minor Treatises*, ed. Michael Higger (New York, 1930).

2. The acceptance of converts in Jewish tradition has engendered a range of responses “from extreme opposition to the highest rev-

erence.” For a summary, see Isaac Klein, *A Guide to Jewish Religious Practice* (New York, 1979) 440-442.

3. My teacher, Rabbi Hershel Matt, ש”ת, suggested this brief pledge, including a promise to observe two or three *mitzvot bein adam lamakom* (such as attend a seder, light Hanukkah candles, and enroll the child in religious school), and two or three *mitzvot bein adam lehavero* (such as teaching the child not to steal or to treat all people equally). Perhaps we should extend this idea to cases where only the mother is Jewish as well.

4. While the Reconstructionist movement has endorsed patrilineal descent, there are many Jewish communities where this is not recognized. I agree with Rabbi Richard Hirsh’s endorsement of “conversion of an infant born of a non-Jewish mother unless circumstances make such an act impossible.”; see his “Jewish Identity and Patrilineal Descent: Some Second Thoughts,” *Raayonot* 4:1 (Winter 1983), 11.

5. Since that time, the Rabbinical Assembly (Conservative) has expressly prohibited a *berit* in cases where there is also to be a baptism.

6. For example, halakhic rulings allow one to claim that one’s own conversion was improper, and to disqualify oneself, but not to disqualify one’s children.

7. *Tosefta Demai* 2:4. “A convert who accepts all the words of Torah except for one word—we do not accept him. R. Yosi said in the name of R. Yehudah—even one of the interpretations of the sages.” See also *B. Bekhorot* 30b. This is one of the key bases for Orthodox rejection of non-Orthodox conversions, since they assume that the ideas of “Torah” in other movements are not completely traditional.

8. In both these cases, the *halakhah* is not decided according to Hillel. In general, we may not accept one who converts for an ulterior motive, or with conditions.