Commentary

What do American Jews believe? A symposium.(part 2)

Commentary | August 1, 1996 | Knobel, Peter; Lamm, Norman; Langer, Ruth; Lapin, Daniel; Lester, Julius; Levenson, Jon D.; Lewin, Nathan; Lieber, David L.; Medved, Michael; Meyer, Michael A.; Neusner, Jacob; Novak, David; Polak, Joseph A.; Prager, Dennis; Rubenstein, Richard L.; Schorsch, Ismar; Singer, David; Steinmetz, Devora; Stone, Susan Last; Teutsch, David A.; Weschler, Harlan J.; Wertheimer, Jack; Yoffie, Eric H.; Zimmerman, Sheldon

Peter Knobel

For years I have struggled to define precisely my belief in God. I treated it as a philosophical and theological question which could be answered in a systematic way. However, I have found that my belief is rooted in experience and story. The narrative portions of our tradition which reflect the collective and individual experience of our people provide a set of stories which reveal God's complexity and presence without resolving my doubts in a systematic way. I resonate to the Lurianic myth of God's brokenness which produced a world in need of repair. I accept as the mission of my life and as the mission of the Jewish people the responsibility to repair the divine by performing mitzvot which heal the world (tikkun olam). God is a reality Who affects my life and is to be found in the Torah.

The text of the Torah, both written and oral, is the mediated word of God. It is the divine light contained in vessels of human construction. It is the historical record of our encounter with the divine, sacred and flawed at the same time, binding and subject to re-vision--re-reading. The give and take of talmudic argument is the paradigm for my relationship to the text. In that sacred conversation, I discover God's presence and therefore revelation.

For me, the structure of sacred days and sacred acts are binding. For example, it is mandatory to observe the Sabbath, but within the mandate there is a plurality of proper responses by individuals and communities. Oneg (joy), kedushah (holiness), and menuhah (rest) become the criteria by which we judge which acts to perform on the Sabbath and which to refrain from. On the other hand, the statement in Genesis 1:27 that all humankind is created in the divine image has been an important meta-halakhic principle which has determined that men and women have equal roles in the community and that God-language must transcend gender, and which, combined with the verse that we must love the stranger (Leviticus 19:18), has led to my involvement in interfaith work. In all areas of life we apply the texts and insights of the halakhah, bringing to it the best of contemporary knowledge, and we determine what God wants us to do in a particular situation. The process, if seriously applied, transforms our actions into mitzvot (commandments) which preserve the Jewish people and repair the world.

I continue to take seriously the concept of chosenness. Our having been singled out to be a "light to the nations" and a "holy nation" remains a major motivation of continued Jewish existence. Our survival is a grand mystery which for me is a sign of chosenness. It is a constant challenge which is a source of responsibility and pride. Our unique role in both the Diaspora and in the reborn state of Israel is to demonstrate that we are the advocates of a society based on economic and social justice. As a minority we are vigilant on behalf of all minorities, calling the power structure to task, and as a majority we must be even more vigilant in order to demonstrate to ourselves and God that we will use power not to oppress but to liberate.

The Holocaust is for me the equivalent of our exile in Egypt--a frightening example of how human evil when unchecked threatens not only our existence but God's existence as well. It has reinforced my belief in partnership between God and humankind and the special role which our faith plays in encouraging others to remain believers.

The state of Israel is a remarkable testimony to the power of hope in response to human evil. It is an opportunity in a new way to sanctify the political process as a people in charge of its destiny. It is a utopianism which is constantly tempered and challenged by realpolitik. It has given us two new sacred days, marking Israel's independence and the liberation of Jerusalem, respectively, through which we testify to God's role in contemporary history. They represent the unfolding of new mitzvot in our day and are a

reminder that God's revelation is not once and for all but continuously present.

If the Holocaust demonstrates that human evil will not be overcome by humanity alone, that only in divine-human partnership can the world be redeemed, the state of Israel is a sign of hope that the collective restoration of the Jewish people might portend the beginning of a new age. However, I am keenly aware of the danger of messianism. We must place our faith in redeeming deeds which gradually repair God and the world. Our witness to God makes God manifest in the world. When the repair is complete it will become apparent because the underlying conditions of human suffering will have been overcome. Our goal is messianic but we must place our faith in the collective effort of all good people to do God's work rather than trust in the miraculous intervention of God through any individual.

The openness of American society is the greatest gift the Jewish people have received, for it enables us to choose our way of life freely. As the pundits have written, we are all Jews by choice. This means that many will fall away, because we have not furnished them with a demonstrated Jewish existence which provides for personal happiness and significant living within a specific community. Our emphasis on personal happiness without a concomitant emphasis on sacred living has led many people to find Jewish life meaningless. On the other hand, one of the characteristics of American life is the crossing of boundaries between groups. Intermarriage is not a Jewish phenomenon alone but cuts across the religious, ethnic, and racial spectrum: it is the "promise" of America where the individual counts above community, and therefore our most serious challenge is to offer a highly educated, thoroughly acculturated, and materially successful Jewish community a way to reframe its life in an explicitly Jewish manner. We must show by example that living and thinking Jewishly make a significant difference. This means that synagogues, Federations, and other Jewish communal agencies must revise their vocabulary to reflect the uniquely Jewish character of their mission. They must make explicit the theological underpinnings of their work and reconnect even the most mundane and secular activities to the concept of doing God's work.

At the same time, this will require a recognition that authenticity does not reside in any single subgroup. In fact, what gives me hope for the Jewish future is the incredible religious creativity which is found in so many places. In the Reform movement we have begun a process which reintegrates ritual and ethics, so that the two realms of mitzvot point back and forth to one another and make possible the sanctification of every moment in an exciting and world-repairing manner.

The denominational and ideological divisions in the Jewish community are both a strength and a weakness. If the conversation is a respectful encounter in which each person lives by the talmudic maxim that "these and these are the words of the living God" and the argument is "for the sake of heaven," divisions enrich discourse and provide fertile ground for the continual flourishing of Jewish life. However, the growing distance between many elements within Orthodoxy and the rest of religious Jewry is unfortunate. The Jewish future is to be found in pluralism and in genuine dialogue. Those who stand opposed to pluralism and dialogue will find themselves increasingly irrelevant in spite of some Pyrrhic victories along the way.

Jewish unity will be forged by real respect for difference. Jewish unity is illusory except when we are threatened from the outside. The battles and name-calling will continue but the majority will not abide a tyranny of the minority.

I detect in the Jewish community a genuine quest for meaning which is beginning to blossom into a real religious revival. In part, it comes from a dissatisfaction with secularism and, in part, from a growing interest in religion in the non-Jewish community. There is serious exploration in all quarters which is exciting. A new American Judaism has been emerging which will be post-denominational. The challenge will be for denominational institutions to respond to this new religiosity in creative and supportive ways.

Peter Knobel is rabbi of Beth Emet-The Free Synagogue (Reform) in Evanston, Illinois.

Norman Lamm

Yes, it goes without saying that I believe in God. But my big and terrifying question is whether He believes in me.... More than a cute answer, this is a religious as opposed to a theological response. Theology, a monologue by man about God, has its place on the periphery of the consciousness of a believing Jew. In the center, however, stands God, and man must not merely think about Him, but respond to Him as part of the dialogue between man and his Creator. The creation of the human race was an act of faith by God in man, and the response of man determines whether that confidence was vindicated or misplaced.

In Judaism, the will of God is made known to man in the Torah, mostly in the form of mitzvot, commandments. These commandments are, by their very nature, binding. They summon man to obey, and the human reaction comes on many levels and is accompanied by a variety of emotions. It is this interplay between summons and response, and their almost infinite variety of nuances and subtleties, that determines

the quality of one's religious experience. But underlying all is the conception of the mitzvot as theonomous rather than autonomous: we may understand or not understand a commandment, prefer one mitzvah to another, but all God's will must be obeyed.

Israel was chosen at Sinai as "a holy nation and a kingdom of priests." A "holy nation" is a mission for the polity in and for itself: to grow in sanctity as a godly people. A "kingdom of priests" is the outward reach of the Jewish enterprise in the world: to be a priest-teacher to all of humanity, inviting it by both word and example to fulfill the "image of God" in which every human being was created. The two are linked: Israel cannot teach if it is not itself informed, and therefore it must always strive to be a "holy nation." And its own inner mission is unfulfilled if it fails to communicate holiness--in its numinousness and its ethical consequences--as "a kingdom of priests" to the rest of the world.

The Torah makes it quite clear that we were chosen neither because of our intrinsic merit nor in order to lord it over others, but by virtue of the patriarchs, especially Abraham, whose heart was "found" by God to be faithful and who was promised a posterity which would carry on his work of "proclaiming the name of God" to the world.

The distinctive role of the Jewish people in today's world is blurred, because our people is hopelessly fragmented, with most Jews as unacquainted with their own history as they are ignorant of the fundamentals of their traditions and its texts. I regard as an aberration the notion that the "liberal agenda" so favored by most American Jews is the true mission of world Jewry. Transforming politics, no matter how highminded, into a religion is a species of contemporary idolatry and is particularly peculiar when espoused by people for whom the separation of piety from politics is an unassailable dogma. The message of Torah must become clear to Jewry before it is propounded to the rest of mankind.

It is therefore incumbent upon that segment of the people which is genuinely and wholeheartedly committed to Torah, whatever the differences in interpretation that divide them, to become the surrogates of all Israel as the "kingdom of priests." That mission must be expressed in universal rather than in parochial terms, and in a manner that is both true to the sources and comprehensible to contemporary men and women who have gone through the experience of modernity. In its broadest terms, that means the teaching of the dignity of humankind (the "image of God"), the unity of all His creatures ("for have we not all one father?"), the concern for the well-being of society (tikkun olam), the sanctity of life ("he who saves one life, it is as if he saved the entire world"), the ultimate redemption of mankind (the belief in messiah--too much to elaborate in a short statement!), etc. More specifically, it means the seven Noahide laws as prescribed by the halakhah.

Such a program, whether conceived of narrowly or broadly, incorporates much of the more generous sentiments of modern Jews at the same time as it rejects the hedonism and relativism that have been adopted by secularist dews as fundamental to their outlook.

The Holocaust, incomprehensibly cruel, has shaken my faith--but not destroyed it. The emergence of Jewish independence, especially after the Holocaust, has reinforced my faith--but not convinced me that we necessarily live in messianic times. The confluence of both in my consciousness has stretched the perimeters and deepened the quality of my faith, and made me more tolerant of both those who lost their faith and those who clearly perceive the footsteps of messiah in the state of Israel. Most of all, it has made me more consciously Jewish and, at the same time, less tolerant of pat answers and simplistic formulations about the truly overarching questions of life and destiny.

To the extent that political views reflect broad cultural orientations, the political center to right-of-center provides the most accommodating environment for the growth of Jewish religious life and, hence, Jewish continuity. If the Left is the home of secularism, materialism, permissiveness, etc., and the Right of a repressive conformity and religious fundamentalism (both descriptions are exaggerated), Jewish life in America will not flourish; the former encourages values that are thoroughly inimical to Judaism, and the latter is threatening to Jews who live in a country with a Christian majority.

Jewish tradition has suffered enormously under the cultural hegemony of the elitists of the Left. The academy and the media, among others, have not proved hospitable to religion in general and to Jewish religion in particular. A right-of-center orientation--inclining to traditional values in such matters as sexual morality--which also respects differences in our multicultural society, and which steers clear of dogmatic extremisms of both Right and Left, will foster Jewish commitment more than either end of the political-cultural spectrum.

Jewish "unity" is a theme guaranteed to evoke an industrial-size yawn. It is a chimerical nostrum regularly invoked by organizational drumbeaters, not an idea capable of real expression. It is best to give up the ghost and speak not of unity, but of civility, respect, and cooperation--where possible. It is inconceivable for me, as

an Orthodox Jew, to think of genuine Jewish religious unity when Reform, currently the largest movement, has embraced patrilinealism, ordained gays and lesbians as Reform rabbis, and otherwise given enthusiastic ecclesiastical approval to almost every avant-garde liberal movement in the general society. Extremes beget extremes, and significant segments of Orthodoxy are moving in the opposite direction, demanding conformity, and associating almost automatically with the more (or even most) right-wing political movements both in America and Israel.

It is a moot question as to which side began the process of estrangement. The fact is that real unity is impossible and even unthinkable today, and the best and most advisable policy is for all to seek enough common ground to devise an agenda which will benefit the entire people.

There can be no large-scale revival of Judaism as long as Jews are vanishing. With out-marriage at an all-time high, the birth rate below replacement, and assimilation rampant, it is hard to conceive of a broad revival of Judaism in this country. But this pessimism applies only to the near future. Looking further ahead, I see a rearrangement of forces in a shrunken American Jewish community--one that is far more committed to Torah, with a much higher birth rate, paying real attention to Jewish education, and that holds the promise of growing into a more populous, self-confident, and religiously committed community--all this, of course, depending upon the nature of the environing society and developments within the state of Israel. The great question at that time will be whether a modicum of cohesiveness can develop between the then much larger religious segment and the smaller but still significant secularist/liberal groups. That is what worried and enlightened Jewish leadership must address itself to--now, not later, when it may well be too late.

Norman Lamm is president of Yeshiva University (Orthodox). His newest work, Hasidic Religious Thought: Sources and Commentary, is to be published shortly by KTAV.

Ruth Langer

God has never called to me out of a thorn bush; I lay no claim to personal revelation, but in myriad ways my adult life has been a constant and growing response to God's voice. An adolescent awakening, spurred by a new awareness of Zionism and the Holocaust, taught me about identity with the people of Israel and drove me to learn as much as I could about our history and our ways. From badgering congregational rabbis I next turned to serious university study and growing personal observance. Studying Torah, hearing God's voice through its words ever more intensively as I completed studies for the Reform rabbinate, made the world of traditional Judaism ever more approachable and congenial. Now, as a professional, I study and teach Torah; as a wife and mother, I maintain a traditional Jewish home, belong to a modern Orthodox congregation, and send my children to an Orthodox day school.

While it is only in retrospect that I see God's participation in my maturation process, I can only ascribe my present life to divine providence. Today, I am the only professor of Jewish studies in the theology department at Boston College, a large Jesuit university. For some reason, Boston College waited three years to fill this position, not knowing that I was living down the street producing a dissertation. Then, from among dozens of highly qualified applicants, they selected me for the job. I take none of this for granted, and it has shaped my piety and my teaching.

Having been given this opportunity, I must respond to the divine mandate. I teach that God has chosen Israel for a particular and difficult task, the substance of which is expressed in Israel's response to God's commands and in its dreams of a messianic future. In many ways, I feel I have been chosen to respond to a divine command. Just as the historical process of Judaism consists of a continual effort to understand God's command, so too must I understand my personal mission in order to fulfill it properly and contribute what I can to the redemption of our world.

How do I represent and present Judaism at Boston College? Most of my students and colleagues are Catholic; many of the rest are Protestant. Only a few are Jews. Inevitably, then, my Judaism comes into constant dialogue with Christianity. This challenges me to formulate and articulate my beliefs in a theologically sophisticated manner, in an integrally Jewish manner, and in terms which will communicate the essence of Judaism. While I struggle to present the totality of Judaism as a rich and multivocal tradition, I also recognize that I represent Jews and Judaism, and that what I teach must also be me and mine.

Because Boston College is a Catholic institution, religion is a topic of discussion and it shapes many aspects of university life. The prevailing atmosphere, though, is one of openness; many want to understand Judaism and to respect it. When my few Jewish students enter into these discussions, they often discover the limits of their own knowledge of their heritage. It is at this point that I provide them with the opportunity to learn more, and in the process of this learning, they become better and more committed Jews.

Life in secular America has created great challenges for Jews. It has allowed individuals to drift without ever

asking deep questions about their religious tradition and its distinctiveness. However, Jews must leave this complacency behind when they enter into contact with religious Americans, especially with those who are genuinely interested in learning from other traditions, and even with those challenging Judaism with missionary intent. Jews, traditionally advocates of secular American society, have much to gain from a religiously engaged society, too. Questions are asked, learning opportunities offered, and, most critically, Jewish education of children gains in priority. While the growth of day schools is more than a simple reaction to living in Christian America, such education for children, particularly at the high-school level, will be the major source of Jewish continuity and perhaps even revival in our times.

This is not to say that I advocate a retreat to the ghetto. When we fail to interact with our greater society, we present just as difficult a problem for the future of Judaism. The very act of dialogue with non-Jews not only challenges us to think more deeply about our Judaism, but also limits the degree to which we can become the scapegoated "other." When we live in a world in which Christians are genuinely interested in addressing the ingrained anti-Semitism and supersessionism of their tradition, can we fail to respond? This interest may be driven by post-Holocaust guilt, but it addresses issues which have plagued Jewish life for millennia. As this dialogue gradually grows to include Muslims, too. we certainly have room to dream of the possibility of a messianic peace.

A true messianic age cannot arrive until Jews also respect and communicate with each other. I have dear relatives and friends who are as passionately committed to Reform Judaism as other relatives and friends are to right-wing Orthodoxy. Just as thoughtful, learned Orthodox Jews argue over the details of what God demands of us, so, too, do Reform Jews. Our God is the same; our paths and areas of deep concern are different. Each challenges the other to communicate on the other's terms, and--often without admitting it--each takes up the challenge. Our tensions, our arguments, arise from too much emphasis on the detail of the moment, and too little attention to the long-term picture and to the undeniable integrity of the other. Our arguments are often not among thoughtful members of the various groups, but between the thoughtful members of one group and the all too commonly disengaged, insufficiently learned members of another. We will always argue, but an argument "for the sake of heaven" is constructive, helping us to discern God's will. I cannot but feel that God desires this process more than the complacency which grows from uniformity and lack of challenge.

There has never been Jewish religious unity, and perhaps there never should be. Jews have never lived in total harmony with their non-Jewish neighbors, and perhaps never will. But the energy generated by these relationships, by these dialogues, is necessary for the future of Judaism. It is a place in which to perceive the "hand" of God.

Ruth Langer is assistant professor of Jewish studies in the theology department at Boston College. She received rabbinic ordination and a Ph.D. in Jewish liturgy from Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion (Reform) in Cincinnati.

Daniel Lapin

See if you can guess the missing word in the opening sentence of Maimonides' monumental code of Jewish law, Mishne Torah: "The foundation of the entire structure and the pillar of all wisdom is to -- that there is a Fundamental Cause [God]." The missing word is not "believe" but "know." The eternal challenge to the Jew of faith is to acquire so clear an understanding of how the world works that God's role becomes obvious. This has nothing to do with fervent proclamations of faith or serendipitous moments of epiphany. It has everything to do with years of disciplined intellectual dedication. It may not be easy but neither is body-building. In both cases, devotees consider the effort worthwhile; what is more, both provide highs along the way.

The path to both knowing and loving God is of course the Torah, which I find to be a comprehensive blueprint of all reality. I do not mean the book of stories that to many secular dews is nothing but accumulated mythology for children or, at best, for adults with childlike minds. No, I mean the majestic and mysterious data stream of about 300,000 letters and the ancient oral wisdom that accompanies them.

Think of the millions of lines of software code that make up a computer operating system such as Windows 95. These lines of code are written using the conventional alpha-numeric characters found on any typewriter keyboard. The lines contain many easily recognizable words like "and," "go to," and "stop." It is not hard to imagine that with a little ingenuity and effort the characters, words, and numbers could be cunningly arranged to read as a piece of prose. Thus one might encounter what appears to be a lengthy, if poorly written, epic poem while remaining oblivious of its higher software purpose. We would endlessly debate the veracity of the saga and the identity of the author without ever realizing the inestimable value the document possesses when used as an operating system rather than as an improbable narrative. The Torah is planet earth's

operating system thinly disguised as a piece of literature.

As such, its laws are every bit as binding as are, say, Newton's laws of motion. Which is to say they do not prescribe as much as they describe. The laws of Torah do not inform us what we should do in the way that the highway code tells us to adhere to the speed limit. They describe the inevitability of cause and effect in societies of people over time. The commandments, the mitzvot, resemble the famous law of gravitation that Sir Isaac Newton published in 1666. It is a mistake to suppose that, until the 17th century, Englishmen were free to float above the countryside like untethered helium balloons until Newton ruthlessly suppressed their freedoms with his oppressive new law. Likewise, Torah laws are binding whether we wisely accept them as the rules of the game or attempt temporarily to dismiss them with a defiant shake of the fist. The difference is between living what seems to be an absurd and random existence and living in an ordered world of rules that are never easy but always consistent. This is a lot like the difference between a hippie and a physicist. One resents laws while the other is grateful for them.

Torah laws are designed to do far more than promote decency; they are intended to produce holiness. If a nation's trend-setters are hedonistic, the people will become depraved. If the trend-setters are only decent, the people will be hedonistic. For the people to be decent, the trend-setters must be holy. This has always been the intended role of the Jew in every country. It also explains why those nations that played host to vital and successful Jewish communities so frequently enjoyed tranquility and prosperity.

Without Jewish messianism it would be hard for hope and optimism to exist. We would all wallow in the gloom and pessimism that now mostly pervades the secular Left. If the nukes don't get you, global warming will. They are right. With no vision of a supernatural, if incomprehensible, redemption down the road, we must take the only rational alternative. Overcrowding, a meteorite collision, food shortages, an unstoppable AIDS epidemic; these are only details. The one certainty is oblivion. And if the end is oblivion, well, nothing much really matters in the interim, does it? By eliminating the promise of that glorious day (even if only faintly grasped) on which God will be one and His Name will be one, we gradually but inexorably introduce into society the nihilism of nipples pierced through by safety pins.

As harrowing and monstrous a nightmare as the Holocaust was, we introduce our own brand of nihilism by celebrating it as the central event of modern Judaism. Frankly, it has always puzzled me that intelligent communal leaders lament Jewish youth's indifference to Judaism while simultaneously assuring the same young people that Judaism is essentially about gas chambers and crematoria. What do they expect them to do? It is futile to deplore the lack of Jewish continuity without providing an answer to the fundamental question: why be Jewish? The Holocaust is hardly the answer to that question.

For all its centrality in Judaism, the land of Israel did provide secularized American Jews with an alternative to Judaism as a religion. For the first time in centuries, Jews who rejected God and His Torah laid claim to the mantle of Jewish identity. What actually made it all the more appealing was that unlike the United States, which was rather inconveniently founded by "religious conservatives," modern Israel was actually founded by secular bolsheviks. It yet remains to be seen whether that particular legacy will survive. So far, events entirely affirm my understanding of God's real-estate-related promises to the Jewish people.

After a catastrophic crash, countless investigators gather to find out why an airplane fell out of the sky. The real question is, why did it ever remain airborne? The answer is that it had engines to convert chemical energy into thrust and wings to convert thrust into lift. Remove any one of those elements and the natural condition of gravity would predominate. The story of late20th-century American Judaism is the story of an airplane running out of fuel. What has then transpired is entirely natural and predictable. Denominational and ideological debates currently raging are the equivalent of food-service problems on a plummeting airliner. They are mere distractions as the altimeter spins dizzyingly downward.

The good news is that for those who wish it, the fuel tanks can be replenished. A vital, successful, and culturally influential Jewish community will reemerge. America will once again draw nourishment, inspiration, and direction from its Jews and the holy fuel of Torah. What, me worry? No, of course not. That is what belief and faith are for. The final chapter in Jewish history is a long way from being written.

Daniel lapin is founding rabbi of the Pacific Jewish Center (Orthodox) in Venice, California, president of Toward Tradition, and a radio talk-show host on KVI in Seattle.

Julius Lester

For almost five years now I have served as lay religious leader of Beth El synagogue in St. Johnsbury, Vermont. I lead services on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, as well as one Sabbath each month, when I conduct services Friday night and a Torah study session on Saturday morning. The congregation comprises 60 or so families and single people. Many, if not most, of the couples are intermarried, with some of the

more active participants in synagogue life being the Gentile spouses.

Beth El is not unusual in this. Neither is it unusual in its lack of interest in affiliating with any of the movements in Judaism. As the only synagogue in northern Vermont, it seeks to be a place where non-Orthodox Jews can worship, and prayer books of both the Reform and Conservative movements are available for whoever leads services on the Sabbaths when I am not there.

Although Beth El is small and in an out-of-the-way place, it is on the cutting edge of Judaism in America because of its conscious decision not to identify itself as Reform, Conservative, or Reconstructionist (Orthodox would be out of the question). Even for many Jews who belong to an affiliated synagogue, such affiliation does not mean much because they are going to do what they want to do, regardless of what Jewish law says. So it is with the members of Beth El.

Yet they attend services. They are curious about Judaism and Jewish law, and are eager to learn. They want a meaningful relationship to Judaism but are not satisfied with the approaches offered by the established movements. But they send their children to the small Hebrew school and struggle to give them a Jewish identity, even though most of them are the only Jewish children in their respective schools.

I do not have many answers for them. First, I believe in God. No, that is not so. When the Swiss psychiatrist Carl Jung was asked if he believed in God, he said, "I know." Knowledge as a function of the intellect implies the absence of belief. My religious experiences have left me with a knowledge beyond intellect. It is a knowledge which informs much of what I do, in small ways on a daily basis and in major ways when it comes to the life-altering decisions I have made and will make in my life.

Unfortunately such knowledge is not transferable or even communicable. I am aware of this when I speak to the congregation. Many of them are not sure about God and do not understand my passion for God and Judaism. But they are not antagonistic to that passion, and I think some allow it to be a surrogate for a passion they do not have and may never have.

Perhaps they accept my passion more easily because we share an ambivalence about Torah being the literal word of God. Even if Torah is directly from God, I believe that God changes. Every word of Torah given at Sinai is not to be understood today as it was then. Neither is every word to be understood literally. Torah is also metaphor, and metaphors by their nature are permeable and complex. Literalism leads to the cheap high of religious absolutism, and too often absolutism is presented as the model of authentic Judaism. This leaves all other expressions of Judaism prey to the accusation of being Judaisms of convenience.

But it is here that the concept of chosenness acquires new meaning. To be chosen by God is to be given enormous responsibility. To be chosen implies that those chosen also choose-or not. It is the element of choice which makes it impossible to speak confidently any longer of Judaism and makes it necessary that we speak, more accurately, of Judaisms. As long as we speak only of Judaism, there will be power struggles over which is the authentic one, and that is a waste of time. There is an unbridgeable gap between what can loosely be called liberal Judaism (Reform, Conservative, and Reconstructionist) and Orthodoxy. Someone raised Reform finds an Orthodox service incomprehensible, and vice versa. The twain cannot meet, and it is time this was acknowledged and the sniping ceased between Orthodoxy and the rest of us.

People laugh when I describe myself as Reconservadox, but I am serious. I prefer services in Hebrew, chanted to traditional melodies. I keep a kosher home. I do not like to drive on the Sabbath but will do so sometimes to go to synagogue. However, I use electricity on the Sabbath and will occasionally engage in a secular activity if it is important enough. That would not include going to the mall, but might include a workshop with an important Tai Chi instructor that I could not avail myself of at another time, Tai Chi being an important part of my health regimen. While I am traditional in my worship, philosophically I am more at home with Reform Judaism's emphasis on the responsibility of each individual Jew to study and choose how to live as a Jew. Christianity has survived quite well with a multiplicity of denominations. Judaism must also.

At the moment,. America is home to the largest number of Jews anywhere or at any time in history. Jews have more freedom here to be Jews than at any time in history and more are choosing not to be Jews than at any time in history. That was perhaps inevitable. After so many centuries of having no choice, it is historically understandable that, given the opportunity, many would choose the other side.

But choice works in many ways. Just as there are Jews choosing not to be Jewish, more Gentiles than ever are choosing to be Jewish. Even those born Jewish must choose to live as Jews-whatever that may mean to them. The convert's experience is becoming a paradigm for being Jewish, regardless of natal origin.

I wonder if that is why some members of my congregation in Vermont love me, while others are mystified

and intrigued, and yet others resent me. I was born Christian and chose Judaism. My presence challenges them to choose Judaism too. I think they find this simultaneously inspiring and frightening.

My love for Judaism has only increased in the fourteen years since my conversion. Judaism asks me to suffuse history with holiness, to choose anew each day the responsibility of holiness. To be holy, Torah teaches, is to be apart from. We must be apart to possess our unique identity; we must be apart to have our unique relationship with God.

The world needs us to be apart as Jews, though it will not acknowledge it. It does not need us to be just another ethnic group, or dissolve into an undifferentiated mass.

The world needs us to assume the difficult task of living as Jews. We do this by making our lives a b'rakhah--a blessing that will not be suppressed or destroyed--regardless. To be a Jew is to be a b'rakhah of laughter expressing our surprise, delight, and wonder in creation and our place in it as Jews. We are called to be a b'rakhah because to be a Jew is to be in love--with a God, a people, and a land. To be a Jew is to live that love--boldly, defiantly, and joyously.

Julius Lester is a writer and teaches Judaic studies, English, and history at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst.

Jon D. Levenson

Yes, I do believe in God, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, Creator and Master of the world, Who has singled Israel out from all peoples and given them His Torah, and Who will redeem them and all the world in the messianic consummation. I refuse, however, to justify my belief in God by reference to anything other than Him, as if something else--a philosophy, an experience, a social identity--could be more certain and more fundamental than God Himself. Belief in God is never really that if it is only one of many beliefs one holds. Instead, it must be the foundation and center of all one's belief and action. Nor can it be confined to the cognitive level: it must be continually concretized and enacted in one's life, despite the powerful deflecting force of our own wayward nature.

God's revelation of His Torah does not come in immediate form, but through (and not despite) human language and human culture, specifically the language and culture of biblical Israel and one of its several successors, rabbinic Judaism. The biblical books, for example, are, in part, products of history, and they abundantly display the conventions of composition, attribution, and historiography of the ancient Near Eastern culture in which they emerged. Given the mediate character of revelation, it is impossible to attribute some of the commandments of the Torah to God but others to human culture. All of them deserve to be respected, read liturgically, and studied in detail, for, in theory, they are all owing to divine revelation.

Practice is another matter, for even in rabbinic times, some commandments were defined out of existence or abolished outright. What Jewry needs today, however, is not a way out of observance but a way into it. Without a sense of the joy of the mitzvah, the love of God remains nonexistent or atrophied, as is the case with most Jews (including some very observant ones) today.

The Jews should not regard themselves as a nation whom God happened to choose at a certain point in its history. Rather, one important theological point of the story of Abraham is that Israel was an idea in God's mind before it was a people in history, called into existence by God's mysterious act of choosing (an act of passionate love). The Jews are constituted for divine service and lose their raison d'etre when they become a nation like all the rest, with no higher, supranational goal. The distinctive role of the Jews in the world today is to bear witness to the God to Whom they owe their existence by pursuing sanctification and elevation through the practice and study of Torah.

The Holocaust, in which one-third of our people were annihilated, may well be the most massive event in Jewish history since the Great War with Rome in 66-73 C.E. It exposed the tenacity of anti-Semitism in Western civilization and discredited the naive expectation that education and material advancement would neutralize the dark side of human nature and produce a more humane world.

Though several religious or anti-religious agendas have sought confirmation in the Holocaust, its legitimate impact on Jewish theology (as opposed to history) strikes me as minimal (this is not the case for Christian theology). True, it does strain the mechanistic notion that God's justice is constant in each person's life and realized fully in this world, but this notion, contested already in the Bible, is less profound than the traditional idea of a God Who identifies with innocent sufferers and redeems them from tragedy, though not always in this life. American Jewry's current preoccupation with memorializing the Holocaust is understandable and, in some ways, commendable, but threatens to obscure this key point: how Jews have lived and can continue to live is vastly more important than how they have died. In particular, Jewish education should always be a

higher priority than memorializing the Holocaust.

The establishment of the state of Israel is another event of enormous import. Israel represents the return of a large segment of the Jewish people to the promised land, a refuge from anti-Semitism, a stimulus for Jewish self-respect, and a priceless showcase for Jewish life in all its contentious variety. The existence of Israel does not, however, solve the problem of Jewish identity in the modern world. In fact, many Israelis are assimilated Jews themselves, as materialistic and hedonistic as any Americans, and if normalized relations with the Palestinians ever come to be, the familiar scourge of intermarriage may be in the offing there, too. Paradoxically, even ardent Israeli nationalism can represent Jewish inauthenticity, especially when it involves arrogance, self-righteousness, machismo, lack of feeling for the dispossessed, and disregard for human life.

In the contemporary American situation, the greatest stimulus to Jewish belief lies in the erosion of confidence in universalism and the emergence of a more multicultural vision of human identity. This is not in the least to deny that the amorphous movement known as "multiculturalism" exhibits dangerous features, e.g., the loss of a sense of general civic responsibility, an inaccurate and self-serving rewriting of history, a simplistic belief in ethno-cultural determinism, and the treatment of truth, goodness, and beauty as mere mystifications of power relations. But in the social sphere, it is part of a momentous cultural shift that signals a new and widespread skepticism about the Wasp as the ideal American and about assimilation as an unmitigated good. And in the philosophical sphere, it indicates a similar doubt that the neutrality and objectivity associated with modern science characterize the only valid way of knowing or the highest one.

These trends hold out the possibility, already a reality among many, that the long-ignored sources of Judaism and the practices associated with them can be recovered. In addition, the spiritual hunger that the culture of acquisition and self-expression has failed to assuage is adding further fuel to the recovery of Judaism among those who have never known it or always misunderstood it.

Several prominent features of the American situation, however, pose formidable challenges to Jewish life. One of these is the melting pot, which, for all the talk of multiculturalism, continues to bubble, with intermarriage of various sorts (including interracial marriage) increasing geometrically. The illiberal truth that intermarriage is Jewish suicide has not been well-received among that most liberal of groups, American Jews. The high estimation of personal autonomy in contemporary American culture is another obstacle to Jewish renewal, for this makes it likely that even when commandments are observed, it is only as a matter of individual choice and not as an act of faithfulness and obedience to a commanding God.

In other words, being observant to whatever degree is not necessarily any indication that one is attempting to overcome the ethic of self-gratification and to replace it with the ethic of altruism and self-discipline that is at the heart of authentic Jewish living. The notion that personal autonomy and the quest for self-fulfillment are sacrosanct can also interfere with acceptance of important elements in Jewish morality, such as the laws governing sexual behavior and the law that a fetus may be killed only in the rarest and gravest of cases.

There is indeed cause to worry about Jewish religious unity. In the past, however much internal Jewish movements differed in theology and practice, marriage among their adherents was usually possible, and the Jews remained one people. Now, owing to serious differences regarding what constitutes a valid conversion and, even more, to the recent acceptance by some groups of patrilineal descent as a criterion for Jewishness, this is no longer the case. The move toward increasing stringency, insularity, and triumphalism among many on the Right has not helped.

Demographic data suggest a grim future for Judaism in America, but there is more in heaven and earth than is comprehended in demographic surveys. I sense a deepening concern about the

erosion of the moral foundations of society and mounting doubt that secularism can repair or sustain them. Among Jews, probably the most secular group in America, this rethinking has barely begun. Its fruits remain to be seen.

JON D. LEVENSON is the Albert A. List professor of Jewish studies at Harvard University and the author, most recently, of The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son: The Transformation of Child Sacrifice in Judaism and Christianity (Yale, 1993) and Creation and the Persistence of Evil: The Jewish Drama of Divine Omnipotence (Princeton, 1994).

Nathan Lewin

THE TALMUD (Shabbat 97a) reports God's description of the Jewish people as "ma'aminim b'nei ma'aminim," believers who are the descendants of believers. Thanks to the believers who were my ancestors, some of whom were murdered because of their beliefs, I have inherited a faith finely honed by

the most profound thinkers in Jewish history.

Eight centuries ago, the greatest Jewish teacher since Moses the Lawgiver, Moshe teen Maimon (the Rambam or Maimonides), articulated thirteen principles of faith that are the guideposts accepted by observant Jews be'emunah shelemah, that is, with total faith. I personally accept the Rambam's thirteen principles unconditionally. They include belief in the divine revelation of Torah and the immutability of its commandments.

My beliefs are not the product of any hard thinking on my part, or of any individual genius. To be honest, I spend little time worrying about them. My personal views concerning the beliefs transmitted to me do not deserve to be spread on the pages of an important national journal of thought and opinion.

In addition to emunot (beliefs), however, I have, to adapt the title of Saadia Gaon's classic 10th-century work, deot (opinions). Some of my opinions rise to the level of convictions firmly held, albeit not be'emunah shelemah. In response to your invitation to give my "view of the religious scene," I make the following observations as a practicing Orthodox Jew who has tried to facilitate and encourage religious observance by fellow dews in the United States.

The wrong question. This symposium's emphasis on the "belief" of America's Jews demonstrates why American Judaism is frail and why its future is being questioned. COMMENTARY mistakenly engrafts onto Judaism the religious priorities of America's overwhelmingly Christian Protestant society. Christian Americans think that belief (and its corollary, organized worship) should be the only expression of one's religion. The questions posed in the symposium suggest that the future of Judaism in America depends on how deeply and profoundly American Jews believe.

I think that the future of Judaism in America depends on whether America's Jews act as Jews. Authentic Judaism rejects the concept, central to American Christian doctrine, that credo and prayer are the sum and substance of religion. We are closer, in this regard, to Muslims and Native Americans than to Episcopalians and Baptists. Our religious community will survive if America's Jews live their lives, celebrate Sabbaths and Jewish holidays, and commemorate life-cycle events as the Jewish people has been doing for 30 centuries, and if they implement, in practice, the moral and ethical principles of the Torah. COMMENTARY recognizes this incidentally. The editors refer to conduct rather than belief only in their introductory statement that there has been "a surprising movement . . . toward a return to religious practice."

The greatest stimuli. The most effective internal stimulus for the continuity of Judaism in the United States is religious education that instructs new generations how Jews should live. An encouraging omen is the success of the baal teshuvah movement that, under the auspices of institutions like Chabad-Lubavitch, Aish Ha Torah, and countless community and synagogue organizations, has brought thousands of American Jews back to varying degrees of religious observance.

The greatest external stimulus is the proliferation of ethnic, racial, and religious groups that make distinctive dress and behavior respectable and even desirable. Jewish observance is facilitated if nonconformist conscientious conduct is protected by law. It behooves us, therefore, to demand freedom for religious observance and deemphasize, and possibly jettison altogether, the American Jewish community's traditional posture as the champion of freedom from religion.

The greatest obstacle. For this reason, I consider the greatest obstacle to the continuity of Judaism in America to be the slavish, mindless, and reflexive devotion of American Jewish leadership to the "Wall of Separation" between church and state. That Wall is more revered by American Jewish organizations than is the Western Wall in Jerusalem, the authentic and lasting symbol of Judaism. Crushed under the Wall of Separation, which, to my mind, is built on a misunderstanding of the values protected by the First Amendment, are many yeshivas and other Jewish religious institutions that cannot survive in today's world without the support that government should provide nondiscriminatorily for religious and conscientious convictions and practices.

There was a time, possibly 60 or 70 years ago, when the threat of Christian proselytizing presented a great danger to America's Jews. It made sense in those bygone days to ensure that government, including public schools, would be as secular as possible, so that Jewish children would not be converted to Christianity by zealous missionary government employees, including public-school teachers. But it is rampant secularism that is today the greatest threat to the continuity of Judaism in the United States. Americans who are born Jewish find the society in which they grow up to be so comfortable that their Judaism, which means little to those who have had no religious education, is surrendered without a second thought.

Contemporary events. The Holocaust, from which my immediate family and I escaped in September 1939, but which claimed as victims three of my grandparents as well as two uncles and an aunt, has fortified my

own faith. There is no rational explanation for the survival of Jewish observance and faith through centuries of persecution and torture, culminating in the Holocaust, other than to accept the proposition that the Jews are a chosen people and that a Supreme Being has ordained the way of life which has endured with our people even through their greatest travails.

The partial realization of the vision that Jews retained during the most devastating times--the creation of a state of Israel--also reaffirms my belief. The existence of a Jewish state and frequent visits to Jerusalem energize my own religious consciousness and encourage me to improve my observance and understanding. But I recognize that Israel both strengthens and weakens American Judaism. It bolsters the American Jewish community because Israel is the world center of authentic Jewish life, a fountain of Jewish learning, and a source of pride and moral strength for the world's Jews. Yet Israel's existence weakens American Jewry by siphoning off its most promising talent and future leadership. Many Jews who take their Judaism seriously choose to live in the Jewish state.

My prediction. Only when Jewish lives are at stake need the community speak with one voice. Disagreement and debate are hallmarks of a vital Jewish community. I am not, therefore, a proponent of muzzling dissent or of insisting on a false facade of unity vis-a-vis the non-Jewish world.

I have confidence that there is a significant prospect for large-scale revival of Judaism in America if, and only if, two fundamental conditions are satisfied: first, if the leadership of the American Jewish community frees itself from its peculiar obsession with a secular state and seeks ways of facilitating religious observance for all. Second, if the Rambam's twelfth principle of faith is not realized first, that is, if the messiah continues to tarry.

NATHAN LEWIN is a Washington lawyer who has frequently represented Orthodox Jewish causes before the Supreme Court.

David L. Lieber

IN REVIEWING my contribution to "The State of Jewish Belief" some 30 years ago, I find myself in general agreement with the position outlined there, though my views have been tempered by events. I still consider myself a "modernist," but am no longer so sure that reason and experience alone will suffice to keep future generations Jewish or, for that matter, save humankind. Without a transcendent point of reference, it is difficult for me to see how human beings can be persuaded to make the personal sacrifices required to keep the race from ecological disaster or avoid a struggle for decreasing resources. Without a conviction that Jewish life and practices have a valuable contribution to make to this effort, I find it difficult to grasp what will, in the long run, keep our young people's fidelities.

In the light of these considerations I now turn to the questions this new symposium raises.

The issue is not whether I believe in God; I do. The question is what I mean by that. To me, "God" refers to the creative power at work bringing order out of chaos and maintaining the interrelatedness of all things. Who or what "God" stands for--a process, a being, a force--I do not know, nor does anyone else. What is clear is that "God" is a human construct which enables us to enter into a personal relationship with that power. As a Jew, I address Him as Adonai, stressing both the unity and the sovereignty of the divine.

Since I find wisdom and inspiration in Torah, I have no difficulty in seeing it as the product of an ongoing revelation, m the same sense in which all revolutionary human insights and discoveries are revelatory. I do not believe in the literal divine authorship of the Torah: its teachings have a prima-facie claim on me, but they constantly have to be reexamined in the light of increasing knowledge and ever greater moral sensitivity. As a Conservative Jew, I give the benefit of the doubt to the tradition and look to my rabbinic colleagues for their guidance. In doing so, I believe I am in line with what rabbis have done through the centuries.

The enduring nature of Israel's covenant with God remains central to Judaism today, and holding on to it, I believe, is critical to our survival as a people. It offers a reason for that survival--to be "a light unto the nations"--and a method, a way of life which seeks to make God manifest in the world. This may have originally constituted a claim to exclusivity, but, as early as the 8th century B.C.E., the prophet Isaiah proclaimed that all peoples would some day serve the God of Israel as they learned to accept the restraints of the moral law. This would, in effect, usher in the messianic age, as Maimonides later interpreted it. But while Maimonides clearly believed in the supernatural coming of a messianic figure, I do not. I find much more congenial a classical rabbinic observation that human salvation will dawn on the world imperceptibly, just as the first glimmer of the morning light is seen in the skies following the darkness of the night.

The Holocaust has made the renewal of our commitment to the covenant all the more necessary, since it and the other genocidal acts with which we are, alas, too familiar demonstrate the horrors of which human beings

are capable. They cannot be eliminated by the use of force alone. Only societies genuinely concerned about social justice and which care about educating the hearts as well as the minds of their people will make the difference. Here religion has a critical role to play.

As for Israel, it is important to me not only because it is the historic homeland of our people and a place of refuge for those who have nowhere else to go, but because it has the potential of becoming a society informed by the Jewish ethos and governed by its ethics. Still, Israel will only strengthen our opportunity to flourish as a Jewish people if it undertakes seriously both to deepen its Jewish roots and to open itself to the free expression of Jewish religion and culture. Unfortunately, we still have a long way to go to achieve that goal, as the extreme religious polarization in Israel attests.

The situation is no less difficult here at home. The problems posed by ignorance, apathy, and mixed marriage are compounded by the fractioning of the community. The situation is not helped by the general state of American culture with its "anything-goes" morality and its encouragement of greed and selfishness. The breakdown of the home and the disintegration of the community have been devastating for American Jews.

It is true that a widespread disillusionment with contemporary American society has led numbers of Jews to adopt more traditional Jewish practices and affiliations, as also in the Christian community. This represents, however, a relatively small percentage of the American Jewish community, leaving large numbers indifferent to Jewish life and distancing themselves from it. Still, there is a growing core of younger Jews who do care about the Jewish future of their children. This is manifested by their return to the synagogue, by the expansion of day-school education and an interest in adult education, and by an effort to introduce Jewish ritual practices into the home.

What is sad is the continuing fracturing of the religious community, frequently accompanied by mutual recriminations. Thus, the Orthodox question the legitimacy of Conservative, Reconstructionist, and Reform conversions and point to the Reform acceptance of the principle of patrilineal descent as but another example of the latter's lack of concern for genuine Jewish unity. On the other hand, non-Orthodox rabbis resent the triumphalism of the Orthodox and especially their support of the religious establishment in Israel. This has resulted in muted and not-so-muted public denunciations that have not redounded to the honor of the religious community.

In the last few years, centrists in all the religious groups have tried to find some common ground. Whether they will be successful remains to be seen. It is clear, though, that religious pluralism, too, requires certain parameters. If, in fact, there is to be a broad center, there will have to be agreement on what constitutes membership in the Jewish people and how that is to be transmitted to the next generation. (That, by the way, is what makes the Conservative movement so appealing--its unwillingness to compromise on the traditional halakhic requirements for conversion, marriage, and divorce.)

Will such a center emerge and, if it does, will it hold? I do not know. It seems likely that, for the foreseeable future, we will not have a common language with the right-wing Orthodox, though we must do all we can to keep our doors open to them. I also believe it may be too late to reclaim large groups of mixed-marrieds and their children. Some will "return" and we should always welcome them, but I would not count on too many doing so, or invest large sums of money for that purpose. Whatever funds are available should rather be used to deepen the knowledge and commitment of those who are still in our midst, in the hope of strengthening their ties to Jewish life.

DO I foresee a large-scale revival of Judaism on American soil? Hardly. But I am not disheartened by that. We always have been small in numbers. What we need is to assure ourselves of a critical mass of educated, committed, and practicing Jews and that, I believe, is possible.

We have the infrastructure. We have a cadre of outstanding scholars in universities throughout the country. We have day schools, camps, and youth movements. By one means or another, including electronic, we can reach every Jew who is interested. Israel, in spite of the present uncertainties, remains a source of hope and pride. Most of all, the great illumination that issues from Torah, as our sages put it, is finally being appreciated by more of our people as they reach out for God.

That is why I remain hopeful of a Jewish future in this land. With the proper leadership and the blessings of the Almighty, we will be able to

transmit the rich heritage we have received from earlier generations to those yet to come.

DAVID L. LIEBER is president-emeritus of the University of Judaism and its Arnold Skovron distinguished service professor of biblical literature and thought. He is also the president of the Rabbinical Assembly, the

international association of Conservative rabbis.

Michael Medved

THE CHIEF distinguishing characteristic of most American Jews is not what they do believe, but what they do not believe.

They do not believe in Jesus as the messiah. Period. End of sentence, end of story. Tragically, for all too many members of today's Jewish community, this rejection marks the sum total of their theological commitment, the beginning and end of their ideological identity as adherents to what is still misleadingly described as "the Jewish faith."

That is why most Jews react so much more negatively toward efforts to convert our children to Christianity than they do to similar attempts directed at those same young people by Buddhists, Hindus, Scientologists, or even Muslims. Since nonacceptance of Jesus is the one common commitment that seems to unify our community, then Jews for Jesus--in contrast to Jews for Buddha or dews for Krishna or the vastly more popular Jews for Nothing--seem to represent a unique threat to that community's core beliefs.

Today, you can find a rabbi who will eagerly marry a Jew and a non-Jew, or two men or two women, or who will gladly incorporate Zen meditation or neo-pagan symbols or trendy elements of radical politics into a wedding ceremony. It would be difficult or impossible, however, to find any recognized rabbi who would be willing to officiate at a wedding of two professing "Messianic Jews"--even if both of them happened to be children of Jewish mothers and therefore official, halakhic members of the people Israel. Once again, acceptance of Jesus is the one theological permutation that Jews of all persuasions find unacceptable, the only issue on which Jewish Americans from the militantly pecular to the militantly hasidic are ready to draw a common line.

Of course, any group that attempts to define itself by what it rejects rather than what it affirms can enjoy only the shakiest, most uncertain existence. Seven-Up might attempt to market itself as "Up-Cola," but Judaism will never survive as "Up-Christianity." Lacking any sense of common commitment or positive purpose, the Jewish community has been famously battered by rising rates of intermarriage and assimilation. A decade ago it seemed possible in some circles to argue that the resulting reduction in the number of active Jews might actually represent a blessing in disguise for our people--but that case is more difficult to make today.

The old argument minimizing the impact of assimilation suggested that it amounted to a normal and healthy winnowing process--a version of Darwinian natural selection that would ensure the "survival of the frummest" (most pious). Indifferent Jews and inauthentic expressions of Jewish identity would gradually wither away and disappear, while traditionalists--spearheaded by an Orthodox community newly invigorated by a swelling baal teshuvah ("returnee") movement--assumed an unquestioned leadership role. According to this scenario, the Jewish community of the future would be smaller but stronger.

As it turns out, the community does seem to be getting smaller, all right--but it is not stronger in any sense. It is, in fact, more confused and divided than ever before.

For one thing, the various nontraditional strands of Judaism have proved stubbornly uncooperative when it comes to liquidating themselves and politely marching off to the scrap heap of history. Gay and lesbian congregations, for instance, appear to be thriving--as do various forms of New Age Judaism, in all their tie-dyed multiplicity.

Meanwhile, the Orthodox community pointedly failed to play the dynamic leadership role that many had expected of it. Perhaps this reflected the fact that habits of insularity and defensiveness die hard, but it also related to deep disappointments about the baal teshuvah movement. Instead of building new bridges between the Orthodox establishment and the secular world they left behind, many of the newly religious enthusiastically embraced the unbending, "black-hat," rejectionist front within the observant world. With a few notable exceptions (like Rabbi Ephraim Buchwald's dynamic National Jewish Outreach Center), the Orthodox seem to have little to say to their fellow (non-Orthodox) Jews--let alone to the world at large.

Does all this mean that my wife and I are wasting our resources with the sacrifices we make to send our children to a Jewish day school? Should we worry that our descendants may be unable to find a minyan--or a Jewish mate?

Hardly. Jewish history is full of examples of vital, intellectually productive Jewish communities that have flourished despite small numbers. Though we may become a less visible and influential presence on the American scene in years to come, this country boasts more than enough passionately committed Jews (who often come equipped with more than enough offspring) to continue some sort of active Jewish presence.

The reduction in overall numbers, regrettable though it is, need not consign us either to oblivion or irrelevancy. Jews would do well to remember that our enemy, Louis Farrakhan, has managed to exert a significant influence on this country as head of a religious movement, the Nation of Islam, which, according to most press reports, includes only 40,000 members nationwide. This means that there are almost certainly more Lubavitch Hasidim in this country than there are committed Farrakhan followers--and both (very different) groups suggest the impact that a relatively small number of people can achieve if they are sufficiently motivated, impassioned, and united. Motivation, passion, and unity are, however, qualities that seem to be in critically short supply in today's Jewish community.

In the final analysis, we can feel sure of the continued existence of the Jewish people for the most fundamental of reasons: God promised that He would keep us around. He never guaranteed gentle or easy treatment (just read Deuteronomy) but He did say we would survive, as we have.

For American Jews, this does not mean that we will not witness a continued shift from this country to Israel as a center of Jewish energy. To some, including my beloved brother Jonathan who has chosen to make his family's life in Jerusalem, this is a wholesome, unavoidable development. If one assumes the continued growth of Jewish identity and vitality in Israel, then the gradual dwindling of the American community need not be a catastrophe for Jews, but it still would be a shame for America.

The prime hope for averting that setback comes, ironically, from the evangelical Christian movement which most American Jews instinctively dislike and distrust. It is increasingly clear that "born-again" Christians and the vigorous counterculture they are creating offer a serious challenge to modernity and secularism, not just a shallow or passing fad. By highlighting the intellectual and practical shortcomings of secularism, the Christian revival may cause some Jews to take a second look at their unquestioning embrace of its bankrupt ideas.

That is why the Christian Right is good for the Jews--despite all the controversy surrounding the recent announcement by the Southern Baptist Convention that its fifteen-million members should treat the conversion of the Jews as a major priority.

Consider the situation on our college campuses. Many Jewish students have by now been approached by one missionary or another, usually quoting Second Isaiah to prove that Jesus was actually the Jewish messiah. The number of Jewish young people who have been "brought to Christ" by such contact is pathetically small, but the number of students who have been led by such encounters into more serious questions about their own Jewish identity--and even into their first contact with campus Jewish organizations--is considerably larger.

By the same token, the deep-seated and nearly universal Jewish resistance to claims of the divinity of Jesus will ensure that even the most engaged and energized sort of Christian evangelism will yield few outright converts. It may, however, create a national atmosphere more hospitable to serious spiritual questions, and to the values of family and self-discipline--thereby encouraging more Jews to discover the timeless truths of their own Torah.

MICHAEL MEDVED is chief film critic of the New York Post, co-host of Sneak Previews on PBS television, and the author of seven hooks. He is also the co-founder of the Pacific Jewish Center in Venice, California.

Michael A. Meyer

IN AN age dubbed by many as "postmodern," I find that my faith is still that of 19th-century Jewish thinkers, whose modernity, I believe, is not at all passe. Like the Jewish religious reformers and philosophers of 100 and more years ago, who remained under the influence of the Enlightenment but qualified its rationalism with historical awareness and critique, I hold to a rational faith mediated through our tradition and confirmed by personal experience and commitment. Thus my belief in God approximates closely that of the German-Jewish Kantian thinker Hermann Cohen who understood God to be an Ideal to which human lives respond and to which the Jews have responded in unique fashion.

It follows that the Torah is not for me divine revelation in any literal sense. Rather the Pentateuch, the Prophets, the Writings, and the rabbinic literature represent our people's ongoing historical endeavor to verbalize their experience of a God Who represents the objective reality of justice, mercy, and love. Since Torah, in the broadest sense, is the evolving expression of our response to God, Jewish history, for all of its secular aspects, becomes in essence a sacred history. Revelation, as the early modern reformers of Judaism held, is indeed progressive--not in the sense that humanity, as a whole, has done an ever better job of living up to its religious awareness, but in that, as we gain more profound moral understandings and undertake broader commitments, we come closer to God.

The God Who is our Ideal is clearly not a personal God except through the metaphors we necessarily employ in prayer. But such a God is incomparably relevant to our religious and moral lives. The Ideal is a source of imperatives for our conduct that are every bit as demanding as those issued by a personal God. On Yom Kippur one confesses failure to live up to the moral absolute that God represents and vows greater effort; in enacting Jewish rituals, one recommits one's life to God. The Ideal does not represent an extension of human will; it challenges individuals to negate selfish desires for the sake of objectives that transcend and often contradict them.

Messianism represents the human thrust toward God. Indeed, it is the sense of nonfulfillment, the awareness that individual lives and social relations remain flawed in our pre-messianic world, that separates us dews from Christians, for whom the Incarnation made salvation a present and personal reality. The chosenness of Israel, as I understand it, means to be in the messianic vanguard, for it was our prophets who first dreamed the messianic dream of amity among

Yet messianism is also gravely dangerous. Pseudo-messianism has afflicted Judaism in various forms during the course of our history, sometimes with devastating results. Today political messianism, to be found among some Orthodox Jews and focused especially upon the state of Israel, represents a serious barrier to peace in the Middle East and bears analogy to fundamentalism within Islam. True Jewish messianism, in my view, points perpetually toward the future, toward a goal always to be striven for but never fully realized in history. Fortunately, the tendency toward apocalypticism in Judaism is largely neutralized by the performance of mitzvot, of individual religious commandments. Through commitment to a life of mitzvot, whether or not they correspond to the traditional enumeration, we can acknowledge that redemption is not realized suddenly through the fruits of military victory but very gradually, one moral and religious act after another.

We must take care, if we are to preserve Judaism, not to let its future hinge upon the epoch-making events of our waning century. The Holocaust has surely shattered earlier illusions. But it signifies neither an end to faith nor the first revelation of an incipient messianic consummation. What the Holocaust represents religiously is an unprecedented failure of human beings to respond to God. As such, it possesses religious relevance even more for non-Jews than for Jews. For Jews, its remembrance is a sacred obligation that we owe to the victims and a powerful stimulus to moral action. But the Holocaust does not lie at the center of Jewish faith and it must not obstruct the flow of energy from the biblical roots. Similarly, the state of Israel, although clearly a turning point in Jewish history and vitally important for the Jewish future, does not represent, for me, a new metaphysical reality. Its religious significance lies in the opportunities it has created for the enhancement of Jewish religious life and the social application of Jewish religious values. These opportunities remain, as yet, far from realization.

In the state of Israel, liberal Jewish faith is beset by Orthodox intolerance and secularist indifference; in the United States, liberal Judaism is endangered by non-Jewish society's unprecedented readiness to absorb its most appealing ideas and traditions. Because liberalism is founded on toleration, it is widely assumed that nonOrthodox Judaism must be open to syncretistic combinations with Christianity. Judaism is prized as long as it makes no claim to exclusivity or even to its own integrity. Our society recognizes the value of religion (or of "spirituality"), but it will not grant Judaism the right to dwell apart, educating its children in Jewish distinctiveness, drawing predominantly from its own tradition, and employing unique forms of worship and observance. Multiculturalism allows us to be part of the multicolored fabric, but not to weave a tapestry of our own.

Within American Judaism I am most concerned by the extremes. The Orthodox have been moving toward greater intolerance of modern culture and of non-Orthodox fellow Jews, especially those who claim to be no less religious than the Orthodox themselves. At the same time, those furthest removed from commitment to Jewish singularity have given up their resistance to syncretistic pressures. That does not mean all "centrists" within American religious Judaism should band together in a single movement. The denominational divisions that currently exist continue to reflect genuine differences of theology and practice. Among them, with the exception of the extremes, unity on crucial matters for the Jewish people, though not always attained, remains possible.

I doubt very much that there will be a large-scale revival of Judaism in America. There will be revivals, but only modest ones. And they will take place against the backdrop of a demographically declining community and escalating assimilatory pressures brought about, mainly, through mixed marriage. The particularizing role of the state of Israel will therefore become more significant for American Judaism, especially for the non-Orthodox. Within my own Reform community there have been encouraging indications of more intensive Jewish education, reappropriation of significant religious traditions, and greater awareness of the insidious dangers that confront Jewish existence. If these trends continue broadly within American Judaism, then the unique Jewish faith, as an ancient and modern response to a morally demanding God, will survive its

contemporary challenges.

MICHAEL A. MEYER is Adolph S. Ochs professor of Jewish history at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion (Reform) in Cincinnati.

Jacob Neusner

TO BE, as I am, "Israel," that is, one of the holy people, heirs of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, always standing before Sinai to hear the commanding voice that says, "I"--that means to know God through the Torah. To be that Israel is to shape life within the paradigms set forth in the Torah. With all Israel called to Sinai together to affirm God's rule, I am one of that holy Israel that in the Torah and there alone knows God first and best and that finds in the Torah the starting point, goal, and purpose of life, both personal and public.

But then there can be no mere "I," no language such as "I personally believe this or that," but only a "we, Israel." That is where negotiations begin, in the exchange between personal, palpable experience of the here and now and that enchanted realm of shared life in the image, after the likeness, of God made manifest in the Torah, that is called, in secular language, "Judaism." Do I respond to theological inquiries by opening the Torah to the right place and pointing to a pertinent passage? Would that life were so simple! What makes matters interesting is, when I come to the Torah, I always bring myself and take myself away. The negotiation is between the "I" that studies, responding to the Torah out of intensely private existence, and that we, that "all Israel" which, all together and all at once, affirms, "We shall do and we shall obey."

So we believe. Do I? Yes, with genuine trust (emunah), and for the same reason: the encounter with the Torah transforms. Indeed, it is there that God is made manifest, so I do believe in God, I do believe the Torah to convey God's will, I do believe that the commandments represent that will, I do believe that Israel is God's first love, and that Israel, then, now, and always, accepts God's dominion and bears witness to God in the world.

But these affirmations form not the conclusion but the starting point for systematic reflection. For embodying such abstract affirmations with the flesh of real life in the here and now forms the challenge to Judaic belief. What does it mean, not to believe in, but to know God in the Torah? How shall we reckon what is at stake in living within Israel, God's first love? What does it mean to hold the age in open arms, to embrace and let go at once, such as the yearning for the messiah entails?

The task of the workaday theologian such as all of us must become is to find the match between the paradigm and the present, to identify the enchantment within the ordinary. All of us who study the Torah practice that theology every time we interpret a teaching in the here and now, in the setting of ordinary life--whether public, whether personal. It is one system: we turn the Torah's teachings into homely truths, but aspire also to turn ourselves into how God would see us--"in our image, after our likeness," in the language of Genesis. Were we to live successful lives, we should write, in how we use our time on earth, a commentary to the Torah.

In that same context, what of the critical public issues that by reason of their consequence the Torah encompasses? I find ample space therein for both the Holocaust and the state of Israel. Who can open Isaiah 54 without seeing us, Israel, as we perished, in our millions, or Ezekiel 37 without reflecting on the renewal of us all represented by the return to the land and the building of the state? Much of prophecy finds its realization in our very day, so that in the Torah some days we read the headlines of the morning. These towering moments of our own times form chapters within the Torah, challenges for the study of the Torah and its paradigm to accommodate.

To these affirmations of the Torah the denominational life of American Judaism proves monumentally irrelevant. Denominations do politics, not Torah. No yeshiva, no rabbinical seminary possesses the monopoly of learning, and in one way or another every denomination has committed its noteworthy stupidity in its reading of the Torah, whether through disproportion, whether through lack of perspective, whether through the utter absence of wisdom. But if all fail, all promise success, too. For what I have said may stand for the faith of holy Israel, whether in the most extreme, segregationist Orthodox Judaisms or in the most accommodating, integrationist Reform and Conservative Judaisms, each within its frame of reference. The one Torah that all of us read in synagogue and in study, the one Talmud that all of us ask to impart structure and meaning to Scripture in the here and now--these form a common inheritance. To the Torah no one's life presents a more authentic occasion for realizing truth in the here and now than any other's, and no one's a less promising moment, either.

True, the various Judaisms read matters differently, underscoring difference. But I find the differences trivial, for I know no Judaism that does not invoke the Torah, the written part in the light of the oral, and to that

common conviction everything else matters very little. The Torah is what nourishes us--a long menu, with sustenance for each. In that context how could we form a more united community than we now do when, in the diverse synagogues, we listen to the proclamation of the same Torah, and from teachers hear essentially congruent interpretations of the Torah? How does a Reform rabbi tell a different tale from an Orthodox one on Passover? Or when it comes to the binding of Isaac or the paradigm of holy Israel set forth in Deuteronomy? And whose sukkah, festival booth, will stand more than twenty cubits high? The footnotes give way, this one's to that one's, but the text stands firm.

And to the uncontingent truths of the revealed Torah, the contingencies of sociology and politics make little difference. A revival of Judaism in America? The Torah retains that power it has always exercised, to reach into the lives of ordinary people and endow with sanctity the community formed by those people. The grandchildren of American Jews utterly divorced from the Torah study Talmud in Bnai Brak in Israel, the grandchildren of Torah sages of Brisk, Lithuania, marry Gentiles. Nothing guarantees anything: God rules. That is why the Torah lives in America and requires no revival. People find their way to its teachings and discover themselves therein. Or they lose their way. In the end God governs. Each of us owes God one death, and, in the interim, bears liability also for that huge and interesting conversation with God that each one of us knows as, and calls, life.

JACOB NEUSNER is distinguished research professor of religious studies at the University of South Florida, Tampa, and professor of religion at Bard College. He is the author of among many other books, Judaism's Theological Voice: The Melody of the Talmud.

David Novak

MY FAITH is in the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, with Whom the Jewish people exists in a unique covenantal relationship. Expression of that faith can only be defined and specified within this covenant between God and His people, into which I have been born and in which I choose to abide.

The covenant consists of three interrelated parts, each one being governed by its own normative form (Torah). First and foremost, there is the written Torah (Scripture), which Jewish tradition has determined to be the directly revealed law of God. Second, this Torah enters the world in order for God to address human beings who have a nature, which, being social, entails moral law that is discernible by human reason. Without allegiance to this prior law (what I would call "proto-Torah"), the Jewish people would not have been capable of submitting itself to God's directly revealed commandments intelligently and freely. The full Torah is more than inter-human morality, but not less than it. And third, there is the oral Torah, which primarily consists of the interpretations of and supplements to the written Torah based on the accumulated experience of the Jewish people (Talmud), a process that is authorized by the written Torah and that is accepted as being under God's special providence.

Because all three aspects of Torah are God's revelation, albeit each in a different mode, I accept all the commandments as personally binding, however much I falter in the observance of them. Also, by engaging in ongoing study of the classical literary sources of Torah and taking a responsible role in the life of the Torah-observant Jewish community, I am empowered to participate actively in debates within the oral Torah as to what the various commandments are and how they are to be interpreted both theoretically and practically.

I believe that God has chosen the Jewish people for a unique relationship with Himself, one whose meaning is primarily understood within the covenant itself. The only meaning of this election for the world here and now is that the elected community should live a life of covenantal faithfulness that testifies to the kingship of God. Thus I believe in the coming of the messiah, who will enable Israel to be fully faithful to God, and be instrumental in the redemptive reconciliation of all humankind with God. In the as yet unredeemed present, belief in the messiah and the final redemption serves to limit the pretensions of human attempts (including religious ones) to construct total human perfection. Recent history, especially, has shown us the disastrously blasphemous results of such totalizing human projects.

Every Jew today lives in the sorrow of the Holocaust and the joy of the state of Israel. The sorrow of the Holocaust urges me to do everything I can to defend the safety of the Jewish people, contribute to its growth, and live more faithfully for God, Whose Name, which is inscribed in our Jewish flesh, the murderers attempted to blot out in the world. In terms of the world, this urges me to work for the elementary justice that was so brutally denied to the victims of the Holocaust, and to fight against any injustice, whether done by non-Jews or even by Jews.

The joy of the state of Israel is that the Jewish people is less vulnerable to its enemies than ever before. And it is the means whereby the Jewish people has been given greater access to and sovereignty in the land of

Israel promised by God to His people. This urges me to defend its interests in the world, and to work for Israel's emergence as a polity in which the Torah in the fullest sense will have real social authority. But this will surely take much more time and security than the new state has had heretofore. One should not expect the state of Israel to be some sort of immment messianic vanguard.

The entrance of religiously based philosophies into discussions of public policy offers the greatest political stimulus to Jewish belief. For it enables Jews to bring our tradition into the moral discussions that affect American society as a whole. We could not do that alone; we need allies. But since the vast majority of those advocating such philosophies are Christians, this will force many Jews who do not opt for either strict sectarian isolation (like that of Hasidism) or strict secularism to reevaluate their historical suspicion of Christianity. This can only be done when more and more Jews realize that the real danger to Jewish faith in America (and elsewhere) is the militant secularism that has utter contempt for just about everything Jewish tradition has ever taught, and that Christians are as much its victims as are Jews precisely because so much of their faith and morality is Jewish. As more Christians acknowledge that and fewer Christians resent it, Jews must respond accordingly.

The current ideological divisions within American Judaism disturb me because the voice of the Torah is usually lost in the debates they generate. On the one hand, too many in the liberal community (Reform and Conservative) seem to be determined to adjust the Torah to whatever is considered generally au courant in the class to which most of their members belong. Hence it is becoming harder and harder to see why their approach should any longer be called "Judaism." On the other hand, the Orthodox community seems to be distancing itself so far from all other Jews, and even eliminating many of its own moderates, that it is becoming harder and harder to see why its approach is not that of a minority sect rather than one for the Jewish "people" as a whole. It is to be hoped that a Jewish community will begin to emerge that will combine love of Torah and love of Jews in a cogent way.

Despite certain encouraging signs, especially qualitative and quantitative advances m Jewish education, I see little evidence for projecting a large-scale revival of Jews or Judaism in America. However, Jewish tradition is suspicious of even counting Jews. Every Jew is to consider himself or herself a whole world, responsible to God for all other Jews in the covenant. Whether there are many dews or few, I believe that God never abandons His people (however much we suffer in this world). My only task as a Jew is to strengthen my faith and its commanded expression.

DAVID NOVAK is the Edgar M. Bronfman professor of modern Judaic studies at the University of Virginia, and a vice president of the Union for Traditional Judaism.

Joseph A. Polak

WE HAVE been transformed by the events of our century; we are no longer who we once were. Noah sees the world around him destroyed and is soon transformed from chaste occupant of the ark to naked carouser. Lot witnesses the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah with similar consequences. The people Israel witness the drowning of the Egyptian army, and the sexual excesses of the Golden Calf episode are not far behind.

Note that the actual view of these catastrophes is in each case obstructed--the ark is windowless; Lot is proscribed from gazing at the destruction; at the sea, only Pharaoh's death is observed (according to at least one rabbinic commentary). One does not need to see catastrophe to be witness to it, one needs merely to survive it, and in our own time, of course, all Jews are survivors.

So Isaac, the prototype for our generation, is the survivor par excellence. He too knows the knife has been raised, he has witnessed the terrible decree that overrides all covenants and human moral expectations. While his judgment appears impaired (consider his assessment of Esau), his faith in God, like most survivors who were religious before the catastrophe, is unshaken. After the akedah, the binding on the altar at Moriah, he becomes a holy man, yet a man with a shadow. As with many religious survivors, it is difficult to be in his presence because he is haunted by memories.

So it is with our generation. As we recall the furtive death-defying queues to don a sole pair of tefillin in the predawn blackness of Auschwitz, the joy of reviewing a halakhic teaching at mortal risk in the shoe factory of the Warsaw Ghetto, the shofar blowing, at their request, for the children already settled on Rosh Hashanah day on the floor of a gas chamber--we have no doubt as to who was at our side.

We have not become atheists; the fire of Torah surely burns as brightly today as it did in the pre-Holocaust world. The commanding voice at Sinai did not merely take place in the past but was uttered in the eternal present of the divine, and was heard as deeply then as it is now. Revelation takes place each day in the oral and written traditions, in the text itself as in living its message, so long as we continue to search, like Rabbi

Akiva Eger in the 19th century, and Rabbi Akiva twenty centuries before him, for what precisely it is that the commandment commands.

But Rabbi Akiva Eger did not have to contend with our immediate history, and it is here that we are as a nation transformed. Like Isaac, we are haunted by a memory, a shadow accompanies us wherever we go, and into each commandment we observe: what about them? What of the six million holy ones who were not privileged to be survivors? What are we to make of this, of this miracle that never took place, of what the religious philosopher Emil L. Fackenheim calls the anti-miracle?

Were we meant as a people to save ourselves? Is it that our destiny has been given over to us now, in greater measure than ever before? Is this what we are to make of mankind's new capacity, emerged from the splitting of the atom, for extinguishing the human race in its entirety; a capacity heretofore exclusively God's? Is this what gene manipulation is all about? Is this why, suddenly, the land of Israel is ours again?

And, like Noah and Lot, is our judgment impaired after the catastrophe? Does this explain Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin's murderer? Does it explain rabbis who neglect unto death patients in their nursing homes or who sexually molest fellow passengers on an airplane? Does it resolve the paradox of people who call themselves observant yet beat their children to death or bilk those who trust them of millions?

"Blessed are You, God . . . Who has chosen us from all peoples, and given us His Torah...." If He eludes us in history, and sometimes He does, we pursue Him in the Torah, from which He is never absent. It is for this task, says this ancient prayer, that we were chosen as a people; it is out of this text that we will learn, shadows and all, to be a light unto all peoples. And to the extent that we refuse to allow God to hide in the interstices of history, which we do through pursuing His voice in the text and in the observance of the commandment (and through never attempting to evade the shadow)--to this extent we succeed in exposing the messiah. And here and there, as we get a glimpse of him, the shadow retreats.

What are we to make, then, of so many Conservative, Reform, and Reconstructionist Jews, whose rabbis, and much more whose laity, are denied in their education the skills that bring access to the text? There is a fire that burns in the heart of the Torah, access to which, as I have tried to show, is the sine qua non of Jewish personhood and peoplehood; yet this is a fire from which they are distanced and from whose warmth they can barely benefit. Put differently, if you ask one of these leaders why they do not observe, say, the Sabbath, their answer is inarticulate because for close to a hundred years they have been denied the skills to see for themselves why anyone would. Their replies are filled with words that are flotsam from a rebellion of another time, of another subject. And as their flanks hemorrhage before their own horrified eyes, they sometimes persist in repeating the old cliches, the scientific relativism of 19th-century ideologists and assimilationists. More frequently, they set what is trendy into a quasi-Judaic vocabulary and make that the basis for their Jewish practices.

They have thus not discovered (to cite one example) that teaching a woman to chant the musical notations of the Torah will not necessarily teach her what is in it; nor will it teach her how to put Jewish children to bed-both being more likely to assure Jewish survival than the training of cantors of any gender. What it does do is sanction women's public performance in the synagogue, which constitutes exercising a "right" rather than engaging in the response to a divine command. Religion in these circles has in some measure been displaced by political theater even as Torah-study has been displaced by Torah-discussion.

From this perspective, then, there are only two movements in American Judaism: one with access to the Torah, the other without. The latter, inso-far as its leadership in this sense is almost indistinguishable from its membership, is doomed to be relativized out of meaningful Jewish life, and for the most part, this is what the statistics of American Jewish demographers are reporting.

The movement of those with Torah knowledge, however haunted and morally tortured, is growing by leaps and bounds, but not at a rate that makes up for the losses of the others; not just for numerical reasons, but because the loss of even a single one of these Jews is a loss to ignorance, and that in itself is unconscionable.

JOSEPH A. POLAK is associate chairman of the halakhah committee of the rabbinical court of Massachusetts, and Hillel rabbi to the Jewish community at Boston University.

Dennis Prager

I BELIEVE IN God, the God of the Bible. This God is good, holy, supranatural, personal. As good and holy are self-explanatory, I will briefly explain supranatural and personal.

Supranatural: God created nature and is in no way part of it. All movements--from Spinoza to Mordecai M.

Kaplan to contemporary nature adulation--that place God within nature are forms of avodah zarah, idol worship. The greatest single purpose of Torah teaching is to separate God from nature--hence, for example, Genesis begins with God creating nature.

Personal: God knows each of us. If God did not know us, there would be no practical difference between atheism and belief.

I believe that the Torah is divinely revealed. This does not necessarily mean that every word is divinely dictated, but I treat the Torah as if it were. The Torah is not merely "the Jewish people's search for God" or anything else that places the Jews, rather than God, at its origin.

I accept the binding nature of the Torah's values, but not of all the rabbis' laws. God is God, rabbis are human. Therefore, for example, I observe each of the Torah's festivals, but do not observe the second day added to each one by the rabbis--it is irrational and it contravenes the Torah; the Torah specifies the number of days for each holiday, and it prohibits adding to or subtracting from its laws. I also use musical instruments on the Sabbath to make religious music, just as the Psalms directed us, but which the rabbis later prohibited.

If I did not believe that the Jews were chosen by God, I would not raise my children as Jews. To bequeath the suffering that may attend being Jewish to my descendants is defensible only if we have a divine calling. And since a good Christian can lead as good and holy a life as a good Jew, I see few compelling reasons to stay Jewish if we are not God's messengers.

Being a messenger is what chosenness is about. We are here to bring the world to ethical monotheism, i.e., the one God and His one universal moral law. Few Jews, tragically, believe in this religious mission to the world: most religious Jews ignore the world, and most Jews who talk to the world ignore Judaism.

Bringing the world to ethical monotheism ought to be the distinctive role of the Jewish people. In reality, however, perhaps the most distinctive role that many secular Jews play in the modern era is working to overthrow Judeo-Christian civilization, the closest thing we have to ethical monotheism. Examples include those Jews who embraced Marxism, or those Jews today who toil to undo the mother-father-based family (through advocating same-sex marriage, removing the stigma from single motherhood, etc.) and to replace God-based ethics with "every man doing what he thinks is right in his own eyes" (Deuteronomy 12:8).

Jewish messianism has caused more problems than it has solved. Let God bring the messiah in His good time. In the meantime, I have to worry about genocide in Rwanda, about children being taken away from loving homes and given to abusive birth parents, and about the gender confusion being foisted upon the next generation by the elite of the present generation.

The Holocaust only confirms for me what I learned in yeshiva, that people are not basically good, and that those who hate the message from Sinai will hate the messengers from Sinai.

The state of Israel, on the other hand, had a profoundly positive impact on my Judaism. It enabled one young Jew, born three years after the Holocaust, to stand tall as a secure Jew. As a Jewish adult, however, I no longer rely on Israel for my Jewish strength; I get it from Judaism.

The greatest stimulus to my Jewish belief is the present decline of America (and the West generally) emanating from its abandonment of God. Once-great universities no longer seek truth, or even believe truth exists. Once-great museums now offer displays of men urinating in other men's mouths and "art works" made of menstrual blood. We have gone from the God-touching music of Johann Sebastian Bach to the anus-touching art of Robert Mapplethorpe, and from seeking truth to deconstructionism--all because, as the Psalms put it, "Wisdom begins with fear of God." No fear of God, no wisdom.

Thus, I came to my passionate beliefs in God and Judaism primarily because I have seen the abyss to which the alternative, secularism, leads.

I look to the denominations for their many excellent schools and summer camps, and for their many fine rabbis and cantors. But when it comes to leading a religious Jewish life in the modern world, the denominations have little to teach. And what they do teach is on occasion quite distant from the Torah as I understand it.

For example, what is one to make of Reform Judaism's calling upon society to redefine marriage? Judaism fought against the world to channel the human sexual drive, which is naturally bi-sexual rather than exclusively heterosexual, into heterosexual, monogamous marriage-and Reform rabbis, in a voice vote in Philadelphia, vote to reject this awesome value and accomplishment. Meanwhile, at the other end of the denominational spectrum is a denomination in which fear of the frum (observant) often determines religious practice more than fear of God; in which women can be told to live alone until they die because their husband will not grant

them a divorce; in which congregants read every Friday night that women who die in childbirth do so because they did not observe proper customs concerning the hallah (the Sabbath bread) or the laws of niddah (sexual purity) or Sabbath candle-lighting.

I do not call for Jewish religious unity because anyone who calls for unity really means, "Unite around my beliefs." Instead, I work to make Jews serious Jews. By this I mean becoming learned in Judaism, using Judaism as the basis of their value system, and practicing essential Jewish ethical and ritual laws. Serious Jews do not have to be entirely unified; there are a number (though not an infinite number) of roads to God inside, as well as outside, Judaism.

A large-scale revival of Judaism in America would be possible under two conditions: the rise of a widespread and passionate non-Orthodox religiosity and/or widespread Jewish hunger for God and Judaism. I see little chance of the former, as Reform, for example, still tends to equate Judaism with social activism and to redefine God in terms of whatever is acceptable to the post-modern, secular, egalitarian mind. And there is little hunger for Judaism because most Jews are already deeply committed to another religion, one that is aggressively secular and man-centered--liberalism.

The only other possibility of a large-scale revival of Judaism is large-scale conversion of non-Jews to Judaism. It is unlikely, but it may actually be more feasible than a large-scale revival among born-Jews. There are millions of nonreligious God-seeking non-Jews whose lives are not given meaning by liberal politics and who would be receptive to the beauty and profundity of Judaism.

The commitment of secular Jews to liberalism was exemplified earlier this year in Tennessee, where the state Senate voted 27 to 1 to urge--not legislate, just urge-the citizens of Tennessee to post the Ten Commandments in their homes, businesses, and schools. Guess who the one dissenter was? A man named Steve Cohen, the only Jew in the Tennessee Senate.

The Jews gave the world the Ten Commandments, and with the same fervor that we gave them, many Jews work to remove them. This does not bode well for a large-scale revival of Judaism. It does bode well, however, for a large-scale revival of nihilism-which is already well under way.

DENNIS PRAGER writes a bi-monthly newsletter, The Prager Perspective. His most recent book is Think a Second Time, a collection of 43 essays on contemporary issues, and he is co-author of The Nine Questions People Ask About Judaism. He conducts a daily three-hour talk show on KABC radio in Los Angeles.

Richard L. Rubenstein

AS I INDICATED in the 1966 COMMENTARY symposium, I believe in God as the Holy Nothingness, the Ground of all existence, the Source out of which we come and to which we ultimately return. This is a very old conception of God with deep roots in Western and Oriental mysticism and some affinity to certain forms of Buddhism. To speak of God as the Holy Nothingness, Das Heilige Nichts, the En Sof of Kabbalah, is to assert that God is beyond all limitation and finite "thinghood." Such imperfect language is not meant to suggest that God is a void. On the contrary, the Holy Nothingness is a plenum so rich that all existence derives therefrom.

Perhaps the best available metaphor for this conception is to liken God to the ocean, and all discrete existing beings to the waves. Each wave has its moment of partially identifiable existence, but there is ultimately no separation between the waves and their oceanic substratum. Hence, each wave is destined to return to and be wholly absorbed by its oceanic ground.

I believe the entire Torah to be the "inheritance of the congregation of Jacob" (Deuteronomy 33:4). It is sacred by virtue of its role in Jewish history, but it is not divinely revealed in any meaningful literal sense. The Torah is the uniquely authoritative document out of which the entire corpus of Jewish religious belief and practice has been and will continue to be derived by future generations. I accept the binding nature of all of the commandments. They embody the collective wisdom of Israel's prophets and teachers throughout history. Nevertheless, there is at present no group within the Jewish community possessed of the universally recognized authority to define or compel religious compliance. And that is as it should be! As in 1966, I believe that the wisest course is to recognize both the binding character of all of the commandments and the voluntary character of our response to them.

In no sense do I believe that Jews or any other people are the chosen of God, nor do I believe the Jewish people has a more distinctive role in the world than any other. We are, however, "a people that dwelleth alone" (Numbers 23:9), unlike any other, for no other people has had our distinctive historical experience. Some of what we have learned may be instructive to others, but there is nothing theologically or morally privileged about our experience or the values that derive from it. Nevertheless, I regularly utter Hebrew

prayers praising God for having chosen Israel, for there is no way to excise references to the election of Israel from the prayer book without destroying its integrity and authenticity.

Jewish messianism offers consolation and hope in the face of catastrophe. Unfortunately, it also offers a program which, if implemented, could lead to further catastrophe. Jewish messianists believe the world's redemption depends upon the resettlement of the "whole" land of Israel and the restoration of the Temple in Jerusalem. The latter objective could only be accomplished by destroying the mosques on the Temple Mount, Islam's most sacred space after Mecca and Medina. The inflamed Muslim response would be swift and calamitous. Unfortunately, like the ancient Zealots, our radical messianists are convinced that God is on their side and they are undeterred by the possibility of a large-scale holy war.

No event during my lifetime has had a greater impact upon me than the Holocaust. Although I was born in the United States to American-born parents, absent the Holocaust it is highly unlikely that I would have entered upon the serious study of Judaism as a vocation. The contrast between the liberal faith in enlightenment and progress in which I was nurtured and the grue-some history of the 20th century was too great to ignore. My first book was entitled after Auschwitz. It was fundamentally an attempt to explore the religious implications of the Holocaust at a time when almost all postwar expressions of Jewish theology ignored the two most decisive events in modern Jewish history, the Holocaust and the birth of Israel.

Although there appears to be general agreement that the debate over Holocaust theology was initiated with the publication of After Auschwitz, my views on God and the Holocaust were with some justice considered outside the normative Jewish mainstream. These views were briefly expressed in the 1966 COMMENTARY symposium where I stated:

How can Jews believe in an omnipotent, beneficent God after Auschwitz? Traditional Jewish theology maintains that God is the ultimate, omnipotent actor in the historical drama. It has interpreted every major catastrophe in Jewish history as God's punishment of a sinful Israel. I fail to see how that position can be maintained without regarding Hitler and the SS as instruments of God's will.... To see any purpose in the death camps, the traditional believer is forced to regard the most demonic, antihuman explosion in all history as a meaningful expression of God's purposes. That is simply too obscene for me to accept.

I remain committed to these views. Although I hold my theological contemporaries in high esteem, I have never regarded as persuasive their attempts to reduce the dissonance between normative Jewish faith and 20th-century Jewish history.

As a result of my more recent Holocaust research, I have moved closer to the Orthodox view of the place of Jews and Judaism in European civilization. Traditional religious leaders always regarded our people as strangers and sojourners there. They understood that Europe never valued religious diversity. Whenever a group arose that was perceived to be a threat to European Christendom, such as the Muslims and the Cathars of 13th-century France, they were eventually eliminated from the continent. History shows that in spite of our long European domicile, Jews, no matter how "assimilated," never ceased to be regarded as alien.

After the Bolshevik Revolution, the Jewish presence became intolerable to important European religious and political elites who regarded Bolshevism as a Jewish assault on Christendom. There may be some regret in contemporary Germany and Eastern Europe about the method of riddance, but little, if any, grief that Jews have ceased to be a significant presence. Neither the pre-Vatican II Catholic Church nor the German Protestant Church had looked with favor upon the emancipation of the Jews and the rise of a class of Jewish writers, thinkers, intellectuals, and academics who for a time were able to influence European Christendom from within. As in the case of the Cathars, it was only a question of time before the highly popular objective of eliminating the Jews was achieved.

Although never proclaimed as such, the Holocaust bore more than a little resemblance to a holy war in which the neo-pagan Nazis did the dirty work for institutions that were destined to outlast them. Admittedly, some Christians rescued Jews at great risk to themselves, but, while morally significant, the number rescued was statistically insignificant. Far from representing a break with the values of European civilization, the Holocaust reveals the extremes to which that civilization was prepared to go to defend what it considered to be the integrity of its religio-cultural inheritance. With Bosnia in mind, I sometimes wonder whether Europe's Muslims may some day experience a repetition of 1492.

I believe the Holocaust still constitutes the greatest single challenge to Jewish belief and continuity. After Auschwitz, I am hardly alone in finding it difficult to utter prayers praising God as a merciful and compassionate Redeemer. The Holocaust also confronts every Jew with the question: "Is Judaism any longer worth dying for?" Convinced Orthodox Jews have no trouble giving an affirmative response. Jews

who marry non-Jews and raise their children as Christians or without religious commitment give another. We tend to underestimate the continuing impact of the Holocaust in fostering not only intermarriage but other avenues of escape from Judaism.

The current denominational and ideological differences within American Judaism are unavoidable. Given the differences in education, class, and background, it would be impossible for one size to fit all. With the rise of a militant Orthodoxy in both the United States and Israel, the differences are bound to increase. It is theologically difficult, if not impossible, for the Orthodox to accord full legitimacy to Reform and Conservative Judaism. As the number of intermarriages increases, the problem worsens. The Jewish community could be heading toward a very real split between the Orthodox and the non-Orthodox, with very few marriages taking place between them. I regret this development but I see no viable solution.

With so large a proportion of American Jews intermarrying, I see no prospect of a large-scale revival.

RICHARD L. RUBENSTEIN is president of the University of Bridgeport. His most recent book is a revised and enlarged edition of After Auschwitz published by Johns Hopkins University Press.

Ismar Schorsch

DESPITE THE approach of the millennium, history and science conspire to shrink the significance of human life. Whatever else our century will be known for, it will surely be recalled for inventing the crime of genocide, discovering a cosmos of unimaginable size, and confirming the randomness at the heart of Darwinian evolution. And yet, I avow and live my people's ancient and oft-tested faith in the existence of God.

I do so because the concept of monotheism as forged by the prophets, rabbis, and mystics of Judaism is consistently grand and expansive and without any confining concreteness. When I pray, my mind is devoid of divine images, as are our synagogues. On the verse in Psalm 103, "Bless the Lord, O my soul," the rabbis struck the following analogy: "David beckoned the soul, which is beyond human ken and whose location is unknown, to praise God Who is beyond the world and whose location is unknown."

I like the poetry of this homily because it alludes to the link between the human and the divine. Though our mind is humbled by the grandeur of God, our soul feels drawn to God's presence. The religious impulse springs from an affinity of being. We are more than what we seem, bearing within us a godly spark ever yearning to repair the rupture that comes with birth. In the words of the 11h-century Spanish Hebrew poet Isaac Ibn Ghiyath (translated by Raymond P. Scheindlin):

I sought You out and found You in my

thoughts:

My heart has eyes within that let me see.

The soul You breathed in me clings to Your

throne,

though it resides in a battered, aching clod.

For me, God is both transcendent and immanent, incomprehensible and knowable. Ignorance does not deprive me of a sense of relationship. God is a verb and not a noun, an ineffable presence that graces my life with a daily touch of eternity. I have no doubt that the Sabbath is a foretaste of the world-to-come. The holy is found through the medium of community and commandments.

I deem the Torah to be the grand record of the initial and formative dialogue between God and Israel, a book that sparkles with the intensity of ongoing religious experience. Its legal core, set in an exquisite narrative framework, repudiated the values and beliefs of the ancient world even as it borrowed heavily from them. What ultimately made it sacred and binding was its public acceptance at the time of Ezra (and often thereafter). Not for nothing did the rabbis regard him as the equal of Moses.

As a Conservative Jew, I live the Judaism fashioned out of the Bible by the rabbis in Palestine and Babylonia from the 1st to the 6th centuries. While they turned the Torah into the foundation text of Judaism, as symbolized by its central role in the synagogue, they did not hesitate to modify, expand, and even abrogate it through interpretation. In the process they achieved the paradox of a canon without closure, a dynamic exegetical culture marked by equal amounts of reverence and responsiveness. The dialogue between God and Israel animates the ferment of rabbinic literature.

If I have departed from rabbinic Judaism, it is in being more circumspect about my ability to detect the hand

of God in history. The black hole of the Holocaust has blurred my vision. Theologically I take refuge in the daring mythic tropes of Lurianic Kabbalah after the expulsions of the 1 5th century, which add up to the concept of a self-limiting God. I am numbed by the human capacity to do evil and the divine reluctance to save us from ourselves. According to the Kotzker rebbe, humankind was put on earth to keep the heavens aloft. When we fail, creation remains unfinished.

Jewish messianism aims at conquering the heart, not the land. The Torah offers a regimen for curbing our passions, a prescription for this-worldly salvation. The land is instrumental: a venue for converting moral theory into public policy and personal behavior. As long as the heart is "devious" and "perverse" (Jeremiah 17:9), lasting victory will elude us. Soberly, Ezekiel and Jeremiah envision a second covenant that will enhance our prospects for peace and justice by inscribing the Torah directly on our hearts.

Nevertheless, I celebrate the rebirth of a democratic and dynamic Israel and revel in the revival of Hebrew. Equally unprecedented, both achievements have placed Israel at the center of Jewish pride, healing, and unity after the Holocaust. For it to stay there, it must not become the exclusive preserve of sectarian interests. The time has come to reaffirm that Israel belongs to all Jews, whether secular or religious, Reform or Orthodox.

Religious pluralism is the inescapable by-product of emancipation and modernity. No amount of coercion will restore the alleged uniformity and concord of the ghetto. Theologically, I believe that Conservative Judaism is heir to the mantle of rabbinic Judaism. But, sociologically, I know that only a variety of choices will affect the chaos of individual freedom. It is the absence of religious diversity that dooms most Israelis to remain stridently secular.

In an open society, faith cannot be forced. It will flourish only if implanted and nurtured through a supreme effort at quality Jewish education. For all the differences between Israeli and American Jews, we face the same precipitous erosion in Jewish identity. We need to forge a partnership on a grand scale to revitalize our transmission in both societies of the scope, depth, and intensity of our common religious culture. Only then will our children share the pride, moral compass, and medium of expression to live their lives Jewishly.

ISMAR SCHORSCH is the chancellor and Rabbi Herman Abramovitz professor of Jewish history at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America (Conservative). His most recent look is From Text to Context: The Turn to History in Modern Judaism (University Press of New England).

David Singer

THIRTY YEARS ago, when COMMENTARY conducted its now-historic symposium on "The State of Jewish Belief," the Orthodox participants were comfortable in their modernity, but at pains to justify their Orthodoxy. In 1996, for me at least, the situation is exactly the reverse: my Orthodoxy is rock solid, but I am hardpressed to justify any accommodation with modernity. Modernity means secularism, and secularism has wrought havoc with Jewish commitment and belief. As long as the "acids of modernity" continue to eat away at the core structures of Jewish life, Judaism will remain in crisis.

About my Orthodoxy, what is there to say? I was blessed with parents who provided me with Orthodox schooling from the first grade through college. This is indispensable. Also vital, however, is the fact that God, in His grace, has given me the capacity to believe, to hear His commanding voice as it speaks in Torah and Jewish tradition. I can thus affirm without hesitation that the Torah is the record of God's revelation to the Jewish people, and that every word of Torah is holy, true, and binding. It is in obedience to Torah that Jews give expression to their chosenness, even as they await the coming of the messiah.

What distinguishes Orthodoxy as a religious way is its adherents' powerful sense of living in a commanded mode. The line of authority is clear: God issues the marching orders and man obeys. About these marching orders there is nothing at all vague--we are talking about law, law that encompasses the whole of life and is sharply focused on detail. As for obedience, it entails an urgent feeling of obligation, in which the sole criterion of significance is the will of God. Ludicrous though it may seem to others, for the committed Orthodox Jew, not tearing toilet paper on the Sabbath is a serious religious issue.

Orthodoxy has staying power because it generates an intricate web of behavior and a powerful sense of community. The two together create a separatist dynamic that has a physical as well as a psychological component. Academic scholars tend to focus on the former, but it is the latter that is most consequential. At every turn, the Orthodox Jew is made aware that he is different, that he is governed by a set of behavioral norms which find no echo in the larger society. This holds true for the Orthodox student on the Ivy League campus no less than for the Hasid in Williamsburg. An Orthodox Jew may be a successful professional, living in an affluent suburb and immersed in the pleasures of American life, yet he can never shake his sense of otherness.

Separatism is anathema to the vast majority of American Jews, but it remains a fact that without a heavy dose of it there can be no Jewish survival. This is especially true in an open, tolerant society like the United States, where Jews are less threatened with anti-Semitism than with being hugged to death by the Gentiles. I will leave it to rabbis to debate theology; from my point of view, the key failing of Conservative and Reform Judaism is in making insufficient allowance for a separatist dimension. Indeed, these movements, together with Reconstructionism and Havurah Judaism, consciously strive for maximum integration into the larger society. One can fully understand the impulse that is at work here, but it is nonetheless a formula for Jewish disaster.

American Jews talk endlessly abut Jewish continuity, but few outside of Orthodoxy are willing to take the steps necessary to make it a reality. The basic ingredient, most certainly, is day-school education, which should be considered a given from the elementary level through high school. (It never ceases to amaze me that parents who turn somersaults to give their children a top-notch general education almost always settle for fourth-rate Jewish supplementary schooling.) Also crucial in this context is a significant commitment to synagogue life, with parents providing a serious model of religious observance. Then again, there is an obvious need for summer camps with solid Jewish content, plus meaningful trips to Israel, plus college experiences that allow for serious Jewish expression. All this is clear-cut; it is merely a matter of will.

But it is precisely the absence of will that is the most striking feature of the current Jewish survival scene. Here one sees the corrosive impact of secularization, which has left the majority of American Jews with an enfeebled sense of Jewishness. If "enfeebled" seems too loaded a term, consider the following: most American Jews do not belong to a synagogue; at any given time, most American Jewish children receive no Jewish education; most American Jews cannot read Hebrew; most American Jews have never been to Israel; and--of greatest consequence--most American Jews at present marry out of the faith. Need I go on?

Secularism is an idol that demands endless sacrifices of Jewish commitment and belief. In return, it holds forth the promise of Jewish engagement with the world of elite culture. But what kind of culture is this? Whatever it may have represented in the past, by now it largely consists of a poisonous mix of relativism, subjectivism, and outright nihilism. Should a Jew give up kosher food for a diet of Michel Foucault? Should a Jew trade in the Babylonian Talmud for a shelf of deconstructionism? Should a Jew pass up Sabbath warmth for a coffee-table edition of Robert Mapplethorpe's pornographic photographs? It was Esau who sold his birthright for a mess of pottage; one might expect better of the descendants of Jacob.

The need of the hour is to recognize that the community of faithful Jews is small, and that there is no easy way out of this situation. Secularization is a massive fact, a massive reality that cannot be swept away by means of a quick fix. If there is to be a "return" (teshavah) in the classic sense, Jews--one by one--will have to find a way to cross the bridge from nonfaith to faith in Torah. Certainly this is a process that can be nurtured, and active steps should be taken to help it along. But in the final analysis, one can only fall back on God's grace-the biblical promise that the Jews will ultimately return to God.

DAVID SINGER is editor of the American Jewish Year Book.

Devora Steinmetz

IT SEEMS to me that there is, at the present time, both too much emphasis on statements of belief and not enough discussion about the meaning of those beliefs or their significance for shaping a religious life. Simply to say that one believes in God, or does not, that Torah is divine revelation, or is not, that dews are God's chosen people, or are not, and that one awaits the messiah, or does not-these are fairly meaningless generalities which, unfortunately, become measures of one's religious identity, community, and affiliation.

Each of these questions raises important theological issues; no doubt, thoughtful and ongoing discussion of them from earliest childhood throughout adulthood would lead to a richer religious life. Instead, we are often bequeathed simple answers by our communities and religious leaders; these answers tend to define the boundaries of our religious identities and affiliations, thus both fragmenting the larger Jewish community and stifling personal and communal religious growth.

Because of this, despite my conviction that such questions are important, I would rather focus at the present time on that which we share and by means of which we grow. What we share, of course, is a library of ancient books, and that is what Jews have always shared. The texts before us precede any questions of how they came to us. As a teacher, I have sat with students of all denominations and discussed, argued, pondered, and struggled with questions of interpretation and meaning. What we all share is the conviction that these texts are central to our identity as Jews, that study of these texts is important, and that there is meaning to be found by seeking it in these texts.

What we experience when we study Torah together is community, commitment, religious growth, and

transcendence; we partake of an activity which joins us together with each other and with all Jews across time and space. Torah study dissolves boundaries, not because it leads to consensus, but because it highlights what we share. Our very disagreements become the stuff of shared experience; our shared experience is the vehicle of individual and communal growth.

We live in a society which celebrates diversity and choice. Most of us have adopted secular values of personal freedom and open inquiry. These values offer both the greatest challenge and, potentially, the greatest stimulus to Jewish life. While the rise of denominations may once have offered the kind of diversity and creativity essential for the health of religious life in an open society, I believe that denominational structures currently limit more than they stimulate individual and communal growth. Boundaries have been carefully drawn, and Jews and Jewish institutions are expected to wear labels and to conform to the ideas and practices which those labels suggest. But it makes no sense, in our society, narrowly to limit choice in religious belief or way of life. Nor is such limitedness authentic to Jewish tradition, which both includes a great variety of different ideas and interpretations and also celebrates dialectic and diverse opinions.

Most of us are exposed only to a narrow slice of the ideas and interpretations which Judaism has incorporated. We are told what to believe and what to deem important, but we are not captivated by the complexity, mystery, and infinite possibility of Torah. The limited Torah with which we are presented is untrue to the tradition, it runs counter to our valuing of diversity and choice in the rest of our lives, it leaves little to captivate those Jews to whom the language of a priori commitment does not speak, and, for those who do accept it, it gives predetermined answers rather than posing the questions which challenge us to grow, to deepen our commitment, and to find new understandings which will enrich our communities.

And so, leaving theology aside for the moment, I will speak the language of symbol and meaning. Whatever God is or is not, awareness of God means to me the awareness that there is something larger than the tiny bit of reality which I experience, and that there is something beyond the present, that the past is not forgotten, that the future must be kept in mind. I am chosen if I believe that I have a calling; the language of chosenness tells me that I have responsibilities and that my life is not lived properly if I do not work to clarify and fulfill my calling. Messianism reminds us that the bleakest reality must never obscure our responsibility to believe in and work for a better world. Israel, the promised land of the Bible as well as the modern state, challenges us to bring our vision of the ideal into the real world, despite the recognition that the realities of human existence limit our capacity to fulfill the dream; we can and must envision the promised land, even though we can never truly reach it. Revelation, too, at once beckons me to seek truth and reminds me that the truth which I or any person sees is limited by human experience; as a seeker of truth, therefore, I must be audacious enough to believe that I can hear God's word and humble enough to recognize that my understanding is limited by my situatedness in this time and place.

In short, we are commanded beings with jobs to do. And, while no one of us can ever have the whole truth, we may neither conclude that every path is right nor refrain from seeking the path which seems most true. The challenge which we are called upon to meet is to construct meaning and purposeful living from an honest and authentic encounter between contemporary reality and values and our Jewish tradition, in its full complexity and richness.

There are those who rewrite Judaism into secular language to the point where it becomes familiar and comfortable but loses its distinctiveness; they live secular lives adorned with attractive Jewish symbols and rituals. Others reject secular values and modern ideas; they attempt to live as they believe Jews have always lived before them, but with the external trappings of modern life. Still others split their lives, adhering to the practices and beliefs which they are taught yet embracing often conflicting secular beliefs and ways of living in areas which they do not perceive to be the domain of religion.

None of these approaches, to my mind, offers the path to a meaningful religious life. Our rootedness in an ancient and dynamic tradition asks us always to bring a different and a broader perspective to our contemporary lives and to the conventions, values, and ideas which we take for granted. Honest, deep study and reflection ought to lead us to awareness of what our two heritages share and where they diverge. The dissonance between them ought to enlarge our perspective; each should be a lens through which we critically examine our worlds and determine what will be our individual and communal missions. We live with two distinct and sometimes conflicting stories and value-systems; the dialectic between them can lead to creativity and wide-awakeness, in place of the stagnation and complacency which are antithetical to religious life.

God, chosenness, messiah, Israel, revelation--these are ideas which, despite different beliefs about them, must call us to study, reflection, action, identity, and community. They will do that most effectively if we lay aside currently divisive statements about what Jews believe and start instead with the adventure which we share. We are living in a time when individualism and personal freedom are leading to a search for

community and shared meaning. This search can bring about Jewish revival only if more and more Jews are drawn into and captivated by the world of authentic Torah study in its complexity, difficulty, richness, and diversity.

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

DEVORA STEINMETZ is the founder and director of Beit Rabban, a nondenominational day school and center for research in Jewish education.

Suzanne Last Stone

I BELIEVE THAT the experience of Sinai established the authority of the Torah, both written and oral, for the community of Israel, including all later generations of Jews. Because I accept the authority of the Torah, I am obligated to believe in God, in the traditional teaching that the Torah is from heaven, and in the binding nature of all the commandments. As Maimonides classified it, belief in God is a positive commandment of the Torah and a proper subject of prescription. I infer from this that belief in God is not solely a matter of faith or personal religious insight, and therefore need not be confined to those who have been granted the gift of a religious personality. Rather, belief can in part be willed and is conditioned by religious practice.

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

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

In classical Jewish sources, chosenness is defined in terms of the giving of the Torah, which commands that Israel become a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. According to one rabbinic commentary, God chose the Jews and threatened to bury them under the mountain of Sinai if they did not accept the Torah. According to another, the people of Israel, unlike all other nations, voluntarily chose to commit themselves to the Torah. The first implies that the very existence of a distinct Jewish nation is dependent on adherence to the Torah. The second invites explorations of the particular characteristics that enabled an already constituted group to submit to the obligations of the Torah. On either reading, the concept of chosenness has historically been a focus of self-definition; and in either case I believe that the distinctive role of the Jewish people, now as in the past, is to observe the commandments and, through their performance, to advance the religious and social goals of the Torah.

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

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

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

observance. From the perspective of faith, I do not view the Holocaust as presenting a challenge to Jewish belief qualitatively different in kind from that posed by prior catastrophes.

In contrast to the Holocaust, the overriding theme of which is the absence or God, the existence of the state of Israel in the face of great odds and the dramatic ingathering of exiles have provided me with a sense of the hand of God acting in history. Yet the manner in which American Jewry focuses its energy on advancing Zionism and memorializing the Holocaust--treating both as having paramount meaning in Jewish life, completely divorced from Jewish tradition and practice--threatens to deflect attention from the main goal: to perpetuate Jewish spiritual, and not solely physical, continuity.

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

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

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

Suzanne Last Stone is professor of law at Cardozo Law School, Yeshiva University. Her articles on comparative Jewish and American legal theory and on Jewish law and literature have appeared in the Harvard Law Review and other journals.

David A. Teutsch

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

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

I believe that Mordecai M. Kaplan, the founder of Reconstructionism, was right when he said that one of the unique characteristics of the Jewish people is our concern with what has ultimate importance in human life. The mitzvah system leads to an awareness of the transcendent value in human life and guides us to living in a moral and spiritual fashion that has redemptive power not only for us as individuals, but for us as a collective. Those actions recommended by Jewish tradition--both old and new--which achieve that end are truly mitzvot. Those parts which are only historically bound or out of keeping with the best values and practices of our time are no longer mitzvot.

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

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

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

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

As has always been the case, the greatest stimulus to Jewish belief is immersion in a community of commitment. The greatest challenge to Jewish continuity is the difficulty that American and other Western Jews have in allowing communitarian commitments to supersede the Western commitment to radical autonomy. It is only in the context of committed community that it is possible to create a rich Jewish experience and the kinds of involvement that give Jewish beliefs and practice their full resonance. For Jewish belief only makes sense within a fully lived civilization, including not only worship and theology but the arts, literature, and shared daily life.

Since I believe that most American Jews share relatively enlightened ethical positions and have a desire to have ritual lives that reflect such commitments, I believe the second great challenge to Jewish continuity today is a lack of rigorous integration of values, everyday practices, ritual and belief systems. That is why I have been so committed to creating a Center for Jewish Ethics at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College that takes a deeply Jewish yet post-halakhic approach to the everyday decisions that people must face m their lives.

At no time in Jewish history did ideological divisions and controversies remain static for a long period. Since our world is changing ever more rapidly, we should not be surprised that denominational and ideological divisions, beliefs, and practices continue to undergo change. I see that not as a sign of shakiness but of the extraordinary ability of Jews and Judaism to adapt to new social, political, and technological situations.

It seems to me clear that, for the moment, there are two fundamental camps within the Jewish community--the relatively small Orthodox population and the much larger population of liberal Jews. I frankly do not now see how that schism is to be healed. But I am far less worried about unity than I am about creating a rigorous, knowledgeable, and exciting liberal Jewish community, and of course I am most concerned about how to do that not only under Reconstructionist auspices but also through other key, pancommunal institutions in American Jewish life.

If we face a truly disastrous schism, it is between Jews who act on the basis of serious commitment to Judaism and those who either do not have that commitment or do not act on it. It is just such a commitment that has led Reconstructionists to play a leading role in training rabbis specifically for campus Hillel societies, Jewish community centers, and chaplaincy. We must meet Jews where they are with the kinds of opportunities and support they need. That way, they can find the value in walking a path that can bring them to Jewish engagement.

The one thing it is safe to say about the future is that we cannot predict it. Of course there is a significant

possibility of a large-scale revival of Judaism in America, but no one can foresee the likelihood of its occurrence. What we can do is prepare for it; we can create conditions that permit it. We can increase the level of Hebrew literacy. We can upgrade the quality of Jewish cultural opportunities. We can create increased opportunities for family education. We can deepen the experience of worship and ritual. We can make certain our communities are inclusive of all possible family structures and reach out to as many Jews as possible. We can create an extraordinarily exciting Jewish future if that is our first priority. It is that vital Jewish future, which grows so naturally out of the Jewish past and present, to which I am passionately committed.

David A. Teutsch is president of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College and editor of the new Reconstructionist prayer-book series, Kol Haneshamah.

Harlan J. Wechsler

I believe in the God of the Bible--Who is utterly other, one, indivisible, and incorporeal, unlike all things of this world. Language cannot describe Him, but He is known through His actions in the world. His wisdom is manifest in His sublime creation, His love in the giving of the Torah, His justice and power in the redemption of His people from slavery. The God of widows and orphans, Who is gracious and compassionate, is neither an object to be examined nor a theorem to be proved. God's existence is, as Abraham Joshua Heschel put it, an "ontological presupposition" that makes the response of the whole person to the mystery and transcendence of living intellectually understandable.

In the Bible and the Talmud, the believer is not a person who believes the unbelievable, but a person who trusts in God's concern. Emunah means just that: trust. The Bible therefore speaks of the people of Israel passing through the Red Sea and then "trusting" in God. To know God is to trust in Him and thereby to be transformed by Him. In places where human beings truly meet, God transforms that meeting. When we are ill, He is there at the bedside and His mercy transforms our pain. When death brings us close to the abyss, God transforms that place. When despair threatens and the whirlwind blows, God's presence makes suffering possible to bear.

God is known not only through the world but through His word. The Torah says that Moses went up to God (Exodus 19:3), and it says likewise that the Lord came down upon Sinai, on the top of the mountain (Exodus 19:20). Moses goes up "below ten handbreadths," Rabbi Yosi explains, and God comes down "above ten handbreadths." The two do not meet, but they come extraordinarily close. That is the nature of revelation: a human cognitive possibility stretched to its outer limit, combined with divine grace that goes very far but does not bring God into the human realm. The Torah occupies the place of that tenth handbreadth.

Revelation is more than divine presence; it yields divine commandments, all of which are binding. Can one have a constitution where only parts of the document have force? But the commandments are alive, not fossils. God's word is subject to human hearing, hearing that is frustrated by the inherent limits of language, let alone language that speaks to two realities: the divine and the human. Therefore Torah must be studied with all the tools of human creativity and analysis, including those of history and literary study. These disciplines help clarify the meaning of its words. But sacred texts stand outside history as well. To the community addressed by them, they infuse life with meaning. That meaning is seldom revealed by probing into their scientific origins--about which we will always be in doubt--but by the literature, the law, the creativity, and the ethical life to which the words give birth.

The saga of Jewish life is the romance between God and the people of Israel. Thus are we chosen. Not that others do not have their stories, too, or that we are better, larger, more powerful or more worthy than they. But our story, our romance, our life with God is embodied in our covenant with Him. Jewish history hands us our chosenness. Only time and the subsequent record of the community's deeds will tell if we are worthy of His love.

The larger role of the Jewish people is to be God's witnesses in a world where His presence may seem remote. This witnessing is twofold. First, to proclaim that there is one God in the world and therefore that history has a Judge Who stands above the temporal realm. The world has a King to Whom every ruler must answer, and to that King every dispossessed and downtrodden person may appeal. Second, Israel is the earthly witness of God's continued involvement in the world. Israel's redemption, whether out of Egypt or out of Auschwitz, is not only for Israel's sake. It is a lesson to the nations of God's justice in the world and His redeeming power. This is the meaning of Isaiah's eschatology and of Jewish messianism: the redemption of Israel brings light to the nations.

The Jewish world I know has been utterly transformed by the Holocaust and Israel. To me, the Holocaust teaches little about God and much about man. God creates all human beings with the power to do good or

evil. What is the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden about if not that? The problem of the Holocaust is the problem of culture. If the finest civilizations can produce mass murder, is literature, philosophy, science, music, or art worth our continued concern? All of my mind tells me that it is. But the future of history needs to see human creativity redeemed from evil. It needs to see man restored to his dignity. How long will that take?

Zionism has restored dignity to the Jewish people by restoring the homeland of the Jews. Powerlessness was a concomitant of homelessness, and therefore the restoration of the Jewish people to its homeland was a practical necessity to rid Jewish life of the end-product of anti Semitism: the destruction of the Jews. This is the era of the ingathering of the exiles; and while the messiah has not come, his footsteps are heard. The mystery of Jewish history is disclosed when the land of Israel is sown and when Jewish culture flourishes in Zion rebuilt by Jews from the four corners of the earth. In Jerusalem, early one morning several years ago, the sound of jackhammers disturbed my sleep. Do these people rise with the sun, I complained to myself? And then, shortly after, I read the daily prayer that praises the Lord Who builds Jerusalem. I was so embarrassed, for how could I have complained? Imagine the privilege of being awakened from my sleep by the Builder of Jerusalem.

Israel has transformed my life. I have learned, personally, the meaning of the words: "For out of Zion the Torah shall go forth and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem," for I have learned Hebrew, Bible, and Talmud in Israel and I have gone out to teach. Every time I am in Israel my own study and observance are renewed and refreshed. The texts come alive and are more compelling than ever before.

In America, Jewish belief is strengthened by the basic decency of our society, a society based on both biblical and Enlightenment ideals. Biblical ideals--the importance of the individual and the community, family-centered morality, and respect for the scriptural tradition--penetrate deeply into American life. The demise of religion in America is a danger to Jews as it is to others. Not long ago, our children grew up with standards of morality in the air. Those times are gone and the vacuum of values needs to be filled with religious rebirth--a rebirth that itself needs the Enlightenment ideal of tolerance. For while yearning for a widespread return to scripturally based values, I fear an atavistic Christianity which encourages hatred of Jews or seeks to convert us to a "truer" faith.

At the same time, the openness of American society allows Jews to disappear, an opportunity seldom offered with so much love. Countering assimilation is therefore one of our foremost challenges. But we are challenged, as well, to participate in the creation of a moral society, a society unmarked by poverty or hate. We are challenged to contribute to the cultural life of America and to create great works of Jewish culture in this Diaspora, great works in English and in Hebrew that reverberate to our people's classic concerns.

Our denominational divisions are particularly American. If you do not like what is happening here, you make something else happen next door. Therefore it is likely that ideological divisions will abound. America has provided us with a home in which we can flourish and multiply, even denominationally. But we need to bridge our differences because we Jews have common concerns--such as maintaining mutually acceptable laws of marriage, divorce, and conversion so that we do not split apart, caring for our needy, and defending ourselves against anti-Semitism. Denominationalism is healthy, not a plague. But we are foolish if we do not recognize that we need each other and that we must continue to be responsible for one another.

A large-scale revival of Judaism in America? Only prophets know. Look not to the numbers, however, because quality and creativity define a renaissance, not the head count. While numbers play a part, religious revivals transform lives--and on that score we are doing quite well.

Harlan J. Wechsler is rabbi of Congregation Or Zarua (Conservative) in New York City and visiting assistant professor of philosophy at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America.

Jack Wertheimer

The religious crisis facing American Jews today transcends individual articles of belief, for it emanates from a clash of world-views. There is a sharp dissonance between traditional Jewish perspectives and the prevailing cultural outlook within American society. As a result, some of the most basic categories of Jewish thought are eroding under the pressures of current mores. No revitalization of Judaism is possible unless the Jewish community confronts this dilemma.

It is noteworthy that the twin pillars supporting the edifice of Judaism are linked together in one of the most commonly uttered Jewish benedictions: "Blessed are You, God, King of the universe, Who has chosen us from all peoples, and has given us His Torah." This blessing from the daily liturgy is also recited in virtually every synagogue across the land by individuals who are called to the Torah whenever it is read in public, and it is central to the ritual performance of almost every bar- and bat-mitzvah celebrant. It unequivocally

expresses the conviction that the Jewish people has been chosen by God and that Judaism is a divinely commanded discipline. But despite the popular usage of this blessing, there is reason to fear that decreasing numbers of Jews have internalized its message.

"Who has chosen us from all peoples": The Hebrew Bible repeatedly reiterates that God has chosen the Israelites to live as a holy people, set apart from others. It bluntly identifies some of the immoral practices of neighboring tribes and enjoins the people of Israel to behave differently. During the Middle Ages, both Christian and Muslim states set Jews apart through legislation and social policy, thereby reinforcing Jewish separateness. And so, despite their frequent contacts with Gentiles, Jews maintained a degree of critical distance from their neighbors, whose "otherness" has been a recurring motif of Jewish folk culture.

But as Jews began their struggle for equality in the modern era, some of these attitudes gradually changed. After all, how could Jews argue for admission as equals on the grounds that they are no different from their neighbors and simultaneously maintain a strong sense of distinctiveness?

The concept of chosenness proved especially problematic in the American setting. Most major theologians produced by American Jewry have been repelled not only by arrogant assertions of Jewish cultural and religious superiority that sometimes are associated with chosenness, but also by the incompatibility of this belief with notions of relativism and pluralism. Indeed, some Jewish religious movements have removed offending passages from the Jewish liturgy in order to neutralize the claim of chosenness: Mordecai M. Kaplan deleted all references to the election of Israel from his Reconstructionist prayer book, and the Reform movement has omitted the distinction between "Israel and the nations" from the liturgy recited at the conclusion of the Sabbath.

This disinclination to demarcate boundaries is creating a crisis of syncretism in the contemporary American Jewish community. In some cases, it has led to the merging of religious ceremonies--such as interfaith wedding rituals--and the extension of liturgical roles to Gentiles during synagogue worship. In other cases, it has led to a syncretism of ideologies whereby political convictions are arbitrarily deemed Jewish because people of Jewish origin hold them. Such confusion, it must be added, emanates from a long history of "Americanization," in which Jews tried to convince themselves that Jewish and American civilizations are not only compatible, but form a seamless tapestry. Generations of American Jews have been taught that the Jewish and Western aspects of their identities mesh neatly rather than produce powerful--perhaps irreconcilable--dissonances.

The American Jewish community now must confront the consequences of this exercise in self-deception. Situated in an open society that welcomes Jews with unprecedented hospitality, American Jewry is losing a significant portion of its population to assimilation and intermarriage. At greatest risk are those who are least prepared to regard Judaism as a unique system with a richly developed culture sometimes profoundly at odds with prevailing mores. Young people who have been reared on a diet of cultural relativism are especially vulnerable, for they have been taught that the sole purpose of religion is to make people "good." In such a climate, even the traditional Jewish prohibition against intermarriage may no longer be invoked. Indeed, one of the first lessons young Jews learn in high school and on college campuses today is that an unwillingness to date members of other ethnic communities is the hallmark of a racist. Only a bigot (or a member of a sanctioned racial or cultural minority) would let parochial loyalties limit his or her marital choices.

"And has given us His Torah." The second endangered Jewish premise concerns the very nature of Judaism as an ordered structure of commandments. Judaism has long been understood as a discipline, a yoke, assumed by Jews because God has commanded them to behave in a particular fashion. The system of Jewish law (halakhah) channels behavior and guides Jews to make particular choices. Although the biblical text already recognizes that human beings have the power to choose, it also defines such decisions as a clear choice between good and evil, between life and death.

Such views are greatly at odds with the prevailing temper of our society, which frames decisions in instrumental or therapeutic terms. We are taught to act in a manner that serves our ends or feels good. We hearken to our own inner voice, and can barely conceive of a commanding voice emanating from outside us. The very notion of a religious "obligation" is deemed oppressive.

To accommodate this way of thinking, Jewish religious teachings have been reformulated. We observe the Sabbath not because it is commanded of us, but because the Sabbath provides us with "quality time" with our families. Other mitzvot, commandments, are to be observed only if we as individuals feel commanded. Even the decision to remain Jewish is now defined as a personal choice; we are not bound by the collective decision of our ancestors, let alone by a system imposed upon the Jewish people by God. For most American Jews, Judaism has ceased to be a coherent discipline, but rather has become a series of subjective selections from an a la carte menu.

Neither the memory of the Holocaust nor an attachment to the state of Israel can alone shore up the besieged world-view of traditional Judaism. At best, each may inspire American Jews to rededicate themselves to some fundamental teachings. The Holocaust dramatizes the heroism of Jews who paid the ultimate price for maintaining their distinctive ways; and the vibrant Jewish state reminds us of what Diaspora Jews have sacrificed in the quest for acceptance--the Hebrew language as the preferred medium for Jewish expression; attachment to a specific parcel of land, the land of Israel; and a visceral connectedness to the family of the Jewish people.

But fundamentally, the task of religious revitalization must be performed by American Jews. If we are receptive, we will find allies among those of our neighbors who also struggle with the dissonance between their Protestant, Catholic, or Muslim religious beliefs and the dominant liberal and secular culture, which has little serious use for any religion. Sadly, most American Jews prefer the company of those who speak soothingly of tolerance even as their powerful culture overwhelms alternative world-views.

Jack Wertheimer is professor of Jewish history at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America (Conservative).

Eric H. Yoffie

I believe in God Who gave Torah to the people of Israel in a process of revelation beginning at Sinai. This belief is the foundation on which all of Judaism is constructed, and without which Judaism--a religious civilization--forfeits meaning, coherence, and the possibility of survival.

The heart of Torah is mitzvah--the individual divine command. The mitzvot of the Jewish tradition direct my conduct and shape my life. But how do I determine which of the mitzvot are binding for me? Torah was transmitted to Moses and his spiritual descendants--the prophets and rabbis who fashioned our tradition and passed it on to subsequent generations. But in recording divine revelation as they experienced it, they did so as fallible human beings, products of the unique conditions of their time. Furthermore, Torah is a compilation of both divine command and human response: it is a record of God talking to Jews and Jews talking to God. When I examine the writings of Torah, how then do I know what is divine revelation and what is human interpretation?

As a mitzvah-inspired liberal Jew, the only option that I have is to decide for myself what binds me. I will seek guidance from rabbis and teachers, but ultimately I must examine each mitsvah and ask the question: do I feel commanded in this instance as Moses was commanded? Here I rely on the words of Martin Buber: "I must distinguish in my innermost being between what is commanded me and what is not commanded me." For the great majority of American Jews, there is no leader or institution with the authority to impose commandments; the autonomous individual decides for himself or herself.

Our chosenness is a religious fact and a sociological necessity. Singled out by God to bring goodness and compassion to an often corrupted humanity, Jews have maintained their hopes in the darkest of times by recognizing their special destiny.

Our chosenness flows from the covenantal relationship between God and the Jewish people. God bestowed Torah upon the Jews and the Jews accepted the gift and its accompanying obligations. No self-aggrandizement is implied by this fact. The covenant is not addressed to other peoples; therefore, in asserting Jewish chosenness, we claim no Jewish monopoly on salvation or truth.

Still, the covenantal community of Israel has a special role to play in history. Our survival cannot be comprehended in any other terms. God has commanded us and needs us to study Torah, engage in prayer, and observe the rituals of our tradition. Most of all, the Eternal One needs us to resuscitate in the world the fundamental values of Torah--that human life is sacred, that justice is a supreme value, and that freedom is the touchstone of civilization--and to bring repair, wholeness, and sanctity to all of humankind.

Belief in the messiah and the messianic age serves as an essential reminder that humanity is redeemable. We are a future-oriented people, looking to a golden age that awaits us over the horizon. But the messiah is always a destination, not a current reality. Messianic frenzies, without exception, have always been catastrophic for our people. Those who insist that the messiah is here or that his coming is imminent are both inviting disaster and engaging in the profanation of God's name.

Anti-Semitism, on the most modest or most massive scale, is a profound evil, requiring an aggressive and immediate political response. But it has no impact on my faith, which is rooted in commitment to Torah.

The land of Israel has a special hold on the Jewish soul. The Torah which spells out for us a way of life and a religious destiny also binds us to a land. The establishment of a sovereign Jewish state in the land of Israel

is a blessing because Israel restores to a segment of the Jewish people control over its own destiny. In a world capable of evil and destruction, the absence of power is a curse. The state of Israel has removed that curse from our heads by returning power to Jewish hands. No longer are Jews totally dependent on the good will of others for their physical safety, and I find relief and satisfaction in that development.

Nonetheless, the religious impact of the Jewish state on my personal faith and observance has been limited. The religious significance of the land of Israel lies in the fact that it provides a framework in which Torah is to be observed and a holy community is to be created. But a dynamic, non-fundamentalist religious life in Israel has yet to emerge. This is due to a variety of factors, including ongoing wars and cultural and political peculiarities which have produced an often extreme religious minority and a mostly secular majority. Liberal American Jews such as myself yearn for a partnership with Israeli Jews in strengthening Jewish religious civilization throughout the world. We will not be satisfied until such a partnership comes into being, but we have made little progress to date.

The decline of community, the collapse of the family, the deterioration of moral standards, the growing gap between rich and poor, and the uncertainties of a technologically advanced economy all threaten Jewish life in America. At the same time, the diversity and tolerance of American culture and the success and wealth of American Jews have opened up opportunities that did not exist a generation ago. Particularly encouraging are the beginnings of a religious revival in the general society which may be related to a similar phenomenon among Jews. At the grass roots of the Jewish community, tremendous religious energy has begun to emerge among at least some of our people-leading to a degree of observance that would have surprised and delighted my grandparents' generation.

I am saddened by the growing rancor in our community on a wide variety of issues, and the tendency of so many Jewish leaders to be more intractable than ever before. I would like to see more humility in Jewish life, and a willingness of all religious groups to recognize their failures and limitations and to engage in ongoing internal stock-taking. This might not bring unity, but at least it might result in regular conversation and cooperation among us.

If there is hope for a greater degree of communal cooperation, it lies in promoting the religious revival mentioned above. The concept of the Jews being one people is a religious idea, and not an ethnic or political one. It is an idea rooted in covenant, in Torah, and in religious commitment. If we are to talk of a measure of Jewish unity in the United States and of the totality and interdependence of the Jewish people throughout the world, we will have to revive the religious ideas on which these notions are based.

On balance, however, I would be surprised if the current divisions--particularly between Orthodox and non-Orthodox religious groups--were to be narrowed in any significant way. To take the most frequently discussed example: the Reform movement will not reverse its decision on patrilineal descent, and Orthodox leaders will not accept this decision at any time in the foreseeable future. This leaves us divided on an issue of fundamental consequence. We will have to learn to live with such divisions, recognizing the advantages of a vigorous pluralism, hoping for a measure of civility, and praying that in the event of an emergency our community can draw together as it has so often done in the past.

A large-scale revival of Judaism in America is dependent on a large-scale investment in Jewish education. It is clear what we need: Jewish camps, family education, day schools, residential retreats, programs in Israel, and outreach programs. We know what to do, but we have never had the will to do it. But the current stirring of Jewish hearts, including the yearning for text study and heartfelt prayer evident in so many of our synagogues, gives me cause for optimism. At a time when Jewish lives are being touched by Torah and when a hunger for the spiritual nourishment of Judaism is everywhere apparent, I would hope that we will find the visionary leadership that will take us in a new direction. It is not too late to commit ourselves to serious Jewish learning as the best path and the first step to securing the Jewish future.

Eric H. Yoffie, a Reform rabbi, is president of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations.

Sheldon Zimmerman

I believe in God, the Creator of the universe and all that exists, the ongoing creative source of its unity, harmony, order, and meaning. God has established a covenantal relationship with all humankind and everything that lives (the Noahide covenant), calling all of us to an ethical life of justice and peace. We are all God's children. This is one of the first and most basic lessons of the Torah. God has called the Jewish people in particular to divine service through an additional covenant, established first with Abraham and Sarah and continuing through the other matriarchs and patriarchs. This covenant was affirmed again at Sinai through Torah and mitzvot, and continues in the covenantal life of the Jewish people in our own time and into the future. We are part, then, of the Jewish family and the larger human family.

God entered history as a redemptive force at the time of the exodus from Egypt and as guarantor of an age of justice and peace for all humankind at the end of history. We humans are called to work together cooperatively and with God to bring this ultimate time into being. Interfaith activity for social justice is a divine requirement. Tikkun olam--the obligation to repair the brokenness of the world--is ours to work for as Jews and together with other human beings.

Within this universal framework, we as Jews have a uniquely particular place. The Jewish people has been called by God to become a kingdom of priests and a holy people. We have responded to this divine call in covenantal relationship with God by creating a system of laws, responsibilities, and obligations incumbent upon us personally and communally.

The Torah is the story of our people's encounter with the divine and our story as well. It frames and anchors our understanding of the world, ourselves, and our place in it, the meaning in and of our lives and God's demands of us. It is the prism through which we see and understand the world (creation, kinship of all humankind, the sacred journey, the land of promise, etc.). In the words, values, and stories of Torah our people have heard God's commanding voice in the past and we return continuously to Torah to attempt to hear God's commanding voice in our lives.

There are times when we do not hear the voice of Sinai in the laws of earlier or present generations, when the law does not take on the power of mitzvah (living commandment) for us. But in our search for mitzvah we are bound to return to Torah again and again--it is our starting place. Torah is binding as the source of our story, the framework of our theology, even though not all the written or oral particulars meet the test of mitzvah. Torah becomes our ongoing attempt and activity to hear God's voice in our own times as we face issues that challenge us to move to newer understandings. Torah is process, not a finished written or oral product.

In response to God's gift of life, we create a life of study, ritual prayer, and acts of loving-kindness which enhances our awareness of this precious gift, deepens our sense of wonder and awe, and enables us to affirm and enrich our lives. This too is part of the process of Torah--our "lived" response to God and God's gifts.

At the same time we are bound by obligations to the Jewish people, its security, vitality, history, and future. Especially after the Holocaust, but in the face of all Jewish history (and its demands upon us) the creative survival of the Jewish people and its covenant with God becomes a necessity. The Holocaust challenged our too-easy reliance on rationalism and modern values. What can it mean to be truly human in the face of such human evil? How have we humans as persons and nations misused our power to destroy each other and God's world? What specific obligations do we as Jews have to and for each other and our people in the face of such profound evil directed against us and our existence? There can be no easy answers to these questions and never again a simple reliance on human good will and feelings when it comes to questions of our continuity and survival.

We live between the poles of the Holocaust and the birth of the state of Israel. To live in the time of the miraculous birth of the third Jewish commonwealth creates new mitzvot for me as a Jew. Where should I live? How do I live out that part of the covenant and Torah bound to the land and its existence? If I choose, as I have at this point, to live in the Diaspora, what will my relationship be to the state, land, and people of Israel?

These remain ongoing questions which challenge and confront me. As a Reform Jew I believe that Reform Judaism cannot be only a Diaspora movement. It must sink its roots deeply in Israel, be informed and formed by it, and at the same time bring the Reform movement's understanding of the spiritual life, Torah, and mitzvah to the people of Israel, many of whom are removed from Jewish rootedness. We are linked in a connection that is being formed, reformed, and reinterpreted as it is lived out in our time.

The openness of America and its welcoming embrace of Judaism end Jews, with the accompanying freedom accorded to each of us, are great challenges today: how to establish communal responsibilities and commitments, a sense of Jewish obligation and mitzvah in the face of the radicalized freedom of self and privatized religiosity. Our continuing existence as a religious community and "faithful" persons requires standards and a renewed sense of mitzvot. In this process we must take seriously personal freedom and choice. But this freedom exists alongside and in a dynamic tension with responsibility and commitment. So much that anchored us even in our freedom is gone--strong communities, neighborhoods, vital Jewish family life. New anchors are emerging--search for literacy, development of a pluralistic community embracing and encouraging a variety of personal faith expressions, the transformation of the synagogue and other communal institutions. In addition, the growing search for personal meaning and values in life and the collapse of aspects of the American dream add to a possible response, a response that comes from deep

within individual souls.

I do not believe that we have ever had Jewish religious unity. We have worked together cooperatively in meeting certain crises. We have never been unified. Nevertheless, I worry about the increasing divisiveness and isolation. New avenues for joint effort and dialogue are essential for a healthy, pluralistic community. But Jewish religious unity has not been, will not be, and perhaps in America should not be on the agenda. After all, there are major areas of disagreement (e.g., religious equality of women, etc.). But certainly the non-Orthodox communities and the centrist Orthodox community have much to discuss and to work on together. Pluralism can be healthy and enriching. We have much to learn from each other.

I believe in the ongoing power of our covenant with God, and the transformative power of Torah and mitzvot in our lives. The American Jewish community just now is emerging from its infancy to an age of renewed responsibility and possibility. Most of us have been here just for a century. We are assuming our place in the Jewish world, creating uniquely American institutions (the synagogue of the 90's, our academies, seminaries, camps, schools, libraries, research centers, communal centers, and institutions). These institutions as they are formed and transformed have the power to create a vital future. We can bring our people home to God, Torah, and mitzvot. There is a manifest joy in being a Jew, a wonderful and precious way of making a difference and investing our lives with meaning.

Two things are happening at the same time: assimilation and abdication on the one hand and, on the other, renewed Jewish living and interest which transcend any one denomination and embrace them all. I believe that if we put our resources, energy, and faith to work, the latter will prevail, and American Judaism will write its unique chapter in covenant history. In all of this, God will be with us too. This I believe.

Sheldon Zimmerman, formerly senior rabbi of Temple Emanu-El in Dallas, is president of Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion (Reform).

Knobel, Peter; Lamm, Norman; Langer, Ruth; Lapin, Daniel; Lester, Julius; Levenson, Jon D.; Lewin, Nathan; Lieber, David L.; Medved, Michael; Meyer, Michael A.; Neusner, Jacob; Novak, David; Polak, Joseph A.; Prager, Dennis; Rubenstein, Richard L.; Schorsch, Ismar; Singer, David; Steinmetz, Devora; Stone, Susan Last; Teutsch, David A.; Weschler, Harlan J.; Wertheimer, Jack; Yoffie, Eric H.; Zimmerman, Sheldon