

American Judaism, Religion, and Democracy
Rabbi Michael G. Holzman
2022-2023 Glossary

Religion: a system of beliefs and behaviors that a group uses to differentiate between the sacred and the profane. While most religions rely upon belief in a deity, God or gods are not as essential as a way to produce and protect holiness.

Spirituality: a collection of beliefs and behaviors an individual uses to find/create personal meaning.

Judaism: The continually produced set of practices and ideas that Jewish people trace back to their origins in the Promised Land and their interaction with God at Mt. Sinai. A modern context categorizes as Judaism-the-religion the practices and ideas concerned with holiness, and all other practices and ideas in a more vague cultural collection called Judaism-as-culture, or “Jewishness.”

American Judaism: Seen as distinct from inherited Ashkenazi or Sephardic Judaisms, the specific shape of Judaism-as-religion developed in dialog with American culture and context.

Republic: a political system that vests ultimate power in the people as a whole.

Democracy: a political system that includes in whole or in part on the input of individual citizens.

Liberalism: the philosophy that individuals possess self-evident, inalienable, innate dignity and equality which cannot be subjugated by other belief systems.

Liberal Democracy: a political system that includes the input of citizens, as well as systems of institutional checks and balance, both within and outside government, to ensure the protection of minority groups and individuals rights. The exact shape of institutions and systems may vary, but they depend upon mutually agreed-upon rational thought, evidenced based facts, and equally applied rule of law.

Constitutional Democracy: a political system that enshrines liberal democracy in a written constitution with safeguards against its own corruption.

Civic Action: the behaviors individuals enact as participants in the system of government.

Policy: the rules and regulations groups create to address shared concerns or solve problems.

Politics: the aggregation and utilization of power by individuals or groups to achieve one’s preferred agenda.

Citizen: a individual member of a political entity (a polity) who obtains all the rights and responsibilities of that entity.

Citizenship: the set of behaviors incumbent upon and granted to citizens.

Norms: the broadly agreed upon, yet unwritten and often unspoken, set of behaviors deemed acceptable within a society or polity.

American Judaism, Spirituality, and Democracy **Texts for Session I**

Rabbi Moshe Feinstein, “Letter Regarding the Obligation to Vote,” Oct. 3, 1984.

On reaching the shores of the United States, Jews found a safe haven. The rights guaranteed by the United States Constitution and the Bill of Rights have allowed us the freedom to practice our religion without interference and to live in this republic in safety. A fundamental principle of Judaism is hakeras hatov – recognizing benefits afforded us and giving expression to our appreciation. Therefore, it is incumbent upon each Jewish citizen to participate in the democratic system which guards the freedoms we enjoy. The most fundamental responsibility incumbent on each individual is to register and to vote. Therefore, I urge all members of the Jewish community to fulfill their obligations by registering as soon as possible, and by voting. By this, we can express our appreciation and contribute to the continued security of our community.

John Adams (Letter to Massachusetts Militia, October 11, 1798).

Because we have no Government armed with Power capable of contending with human Passions unbridled by . . . morality and Religion. Avarice, ambition, revenge, or gallantry would break the strongest cords of our Constitution as a whale goes through a net. Our Constitution was made only for a moral and religious people. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other.

Benjamin Rush (Letter to Noah Webster July 20, 1798, qtd. in Gorski, Philip American Covenant, 70).

. . . all our attempts to produce political happiness by the solitary influence of human reason will be . . . fruitless. . . Reason produces, it is true, great and popular truths, but it affords motives too feeble to induce mankind to act agreeably to them. Christianity unfolds the same truths and accompanies them with motives.

Alexis De Tocqueville, Democracy in America, 1831 (Simon and Brown ed. p.363)

Religion in America takes no direct part in the government of society, but it must nevertheless be regarded as the foremost of the political institutions of that country; for if it does not impart a taste for freedom, it facilitates the use of free institutions. Indeed, it is in this same point of view that the inhabitants of the United States themselves look upon religious belief. I do not know whether all the Americans have a sincere faith in their religion, for who can search the human heart? but I am certain that they hold it to be indispensable to the maintenance of republican institutions. This opinion is not peculiar to a class of citizens or to a party, but it belongs to the whole nation, and to every rank of society.

Timothy P. Carney, Alienated America, 2020

The more frequently a Republican reported going to church, the less likely he was to vote for Trump in the early [2016] primaries. Trump was weakest among those Republicans who go to church the most (32 percent of this group voted for him in the primaries), and did nearly twice as well (62 percent) among those who never go to church. (121)

When Wall Street Journal political reporters wanted to go to the heart of Trump Country in March 2016, they traveled to Buchanan County. Buchanan County is in Virginia, which voted on March 1. But to give you an idea of the place, it borders West Virginia and Kentucky.

The Place that Wants Donald Trump Most was the headline from Buchanan County. “There isn’t much Jody Bostic believes in these days,” the article began, zooming in on a former coal miner. While this article barely focused on religious matters, religion—or its absence—is central to the story of Appalachia. Out of 3,143 counties in America, Buchanan County ranks 3,028th in religious adherence, according to the Association of Religion Data Archives (ARDA). Only a quarter of Buchanan County professes a religion, which is half the rate of the median American county. (121-122)

Steven B. Smith, *Reclaiming Patriotism in an Age of Extremes*, October, 2022

Patriotism is more than devotion to a set of constitutional procedures. It requires affection for a way of life—for the mix of moral and religious practices, habits, customs, and sentiments that makes a people who they are. Patriotism without ethos is an empty shell. It is a kind of patriotism that only a constitutional lawyer could love. (167)

American patriotism, I have tried to argue, imposes special demands on its citizens. Ours is a peculiarly principled patriotism grounded in certain higher truths—such as the commitment to equality, the protection of individual rights, and the aspiration to freedom—contained in our most precious founding documents. These principles are not, strictly speaking, “ours” but belong to all peoples, at all times, anywhere. They are the property of humanity. But American patriotism is not defined exclusively by these commitments. It is also rooted in our history and collective memory, in the stories we tell about ourselves as a people. It is a matter not only of logos, but also of ethos. These stories tell us who we are and where we have come from, as well as who we want to be and what we aspire to. This is not to say that patriotism is a myth, but it is the collective expression of what we imagine ourselves to be. It is embedded in what Benedict Anderson has called an “imagined community”—the sense of collective identity that makes a people. (185)

Jill Jacobs, “The Torah is Political. Rabbis Can Be Too,” Huffington Post, September 26, 2011.

The Torah is political because it lays out a vision for a just civil society. It is political because it forms the basis for a social contract. It is political because it concerns itself with relations among human beings as much as with relations between human beings and God. It is political because a liberation struggle stands at its core. It is political because it demands that those with more wealth take responsibility for those with less. It is political because it forbids those with more power from taking advantage of those with less. And it is political because it is a document meant to be lived.

From *A Time to Speak*, Daniel G. Zemel

Isaac Mayer Wise unleashed
a chapter of religious reform;
every time we make a ritual
change, sing a new liturgical
melody, or are inspired
by a poem during our
worship, we are celebrating
the religious creativity
that Wise unlocked.

350 YEARS OF JEWS IN AMERICA

EREV ROSH HASHANAH
SEPTEMBER 15, 2004 / 1 TISHREI 5765

This sermon was delivered in 2004 to discuss
the 350th anniversary of the first Jews to
arrive in America, in September 1654.

DEAR FRIENDS,

Many of you have heard me refer to my study group, a group of about 15 rabbis who live between Washington and Boston and gather in New York around four to five times a year to study. This past year or so, we devoted our study to kabbalah, Jewish mysticism. We studied with one of the outstanding young scholars of kabbalah on the academic scene today examining the emergence of kabbalah in the Middle Ages, Abulafia, the Zohar, the kabbalah of Safed. You will hear me talk more about kabbalah itself in a sermon next week on Yom Kippur.

This evening I just ask your indulgence because I know that some of you have heard me tell this little story before. As we prepared for our final session on kabbalah last spring, we decided that we wanted to take advantage of this scholar's presence, and spend a couple of hours discussing kabbalah and contemporary Reform Judaism. We decided that we would each prepare a brief statement that reflected our thinking as Reform rabbis on what

kabbalah represented to us. The shock was that we each pretty much wrote the same thing. We each looked at kabbalah in the exact same way. Our impression? The kabbalists had a story; we don't have one. What do I mean by that? The kabbalists had a story that explained who they were and what their Jewish lives were about. Their story connected them and their lives to the larger Jewish story. It was all so self-evident for them. A story is what makes your life self-evident and connects it to a larger whole. We in America at this moment in time lack such a narrative.

Next week, I will share the story of the kabbalists, but this evening and tomorrow morning, I will consider the American Jewish story. This month begins the celebration of 350 years of Jewish life in America. In September, 1654, twenty-three Sephardic Jewish Dutch refugees from Recife, Brazil arrived in New Amsterdam, having been expelled from Brazil after its conquest by the Portuguese. With their disembarkment into New Amsterdam, we can say that Jewish life in what was to become the United States began. They were hardly welcomed with open arms. Peter Stuyvesant, the Dutch governor, didn't want them, and tried, to no avail, to have them expelled. Jonathan Sarna, in his just-published history of American Judaism, explains the dilemma is being: "...forced to choose between their economic interests and their religious sensibilities, the directors of the Dutch West India Company...voted with their pocketbooks..." As they wrote of Stuyvesant, "...many of the Jewish nation are principal shareholders..." in the company. The Jewish refugees were allowed to stay. Sarna wryly notes in his introduction that American Jewish history is typically viewed as a history of ever-increasing assimilation, and, truth be told, this first group of twenty-three Jews did not stay in America. But others did follow them shortly after. Three hundred fifty years is a long time. It is worth a pause and

a review. This evening and tomorrow morning, I would like to consider two different topics: both American Jewish history and the American Jewish story, and see what we can learn from them in shaping our own identities.

By and large, the Jewish academic religious crowd doesn't give American Jewish history a weighty standing. It is not required learning in American rabbinical education. It isn't viewed as Jewish in the way that Bible, Talmud, codes, and theology are viewed. Ancient history and medieval history are encouraged because of the way their study enriches the study of rabbinic literature, including the Talmud, midrash, Maimonides, Halevi, and Rashi, among others. American Jewish history is too new to have this sort of status. What is to be gained in terms of an insight into Judaism by considering this latest chapter of American Judaism? But 350 years is not nothing, so perhaps America has some claim to make.

My former teacher, Jacob Neusner, asks this question and sharpens the challenge in a highly controversial yet brilliant essay that seeks to compare 350 years of Jewish life in America with other similar blocks of time in Jewish history, as a way of measuring what our contribution to the development of Judaism has been. We don't do well. Neusner cites the following: "Palestinian Jews created the Mishnah, the foundation document for all of rabbinic Judaism, in a period of 130 years, from the destruction of the Temple by the Romans in 70 to 200." Even if we add 200 years to reflect years of Hellenistic influence on Jewish life that the Mishnah reflects, it is a remarkable accomplishment. Neusner further notes that the Talmud of the Land of Israel was produced in 200 years, and the Babylonian Talmud, the definitive statement of Rabbinic Judaism, was written and edited in a period of not more than 400 years, from 200-600 CE. By these lofty standards, we have produced nothing this lasting or defining. Turning to

more recent history Neusner argues that the Jews of Germany encountered the enlightenment in the 17th century and by 1900 had created all of the modern interpretations of Judaism that most of the Jewish world now embrace in one form or another, namely Reform, Conservative, and Modern Orthodox Judaism.

Neusner's critique is, as I said, both controversial and fascinating, well worth a discussion. He sees our period as thus far intellectually and religiously bankrupt, and reflects on his own reasons as to why. The Neusner critique is worth a discussion, and I would like to do that at some time, but my goal this evening is not to begin this new year by sending you home either angry or depressed. Neusner raises a challenge regarding the seriousness of our Jewish commitment.

I am interested in other questions that relate to history: What happened to make us who we are? And questions that relate to story: What are the narratives that define and connect us? My suspicion is that understanding the two is related, and that one reason that we lack a story is that we lack heroes. Ask yourself, Who is an American Jewish hero? Who are our larger-than-life figures? What were their stories? Do we have American Jewish figures who are our Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln or Franklin Roosevelt? These are what interest me tonight. But in order to get at these questions, let us take a look for a moment at American Jewish history and at what I will call its three defining moments: one each for the 18th century, the 19th century and the 20th century.

18th century: An Exchange of Letters

On August 17, 1790, Moses Seixas, the warden of Congregation Kahal Kadosh Yeshuat Israel, better known as the Hebrew Congregation of Newport, Rhode Island, penned an epistle to

George Washington, welcoming the newly elected first President of the United States on his visit to that city. Newport had suffered greatly during the Revolutionary War. Invaded and occupied by the British and blockaded by the American navy, hundreds of residents fled, and many of those who remained were Tories. After the British defeat, the Tories fled in turn. Newport's nineteenth-century economy never recovered from these interruptions and dislocations.

Washington's visit to Newport was largely a ceremonial goodwill tour, made on behalf of the new national government created by the adoption of the Constitution in 1787. Newport had been a good home to its Jewish residents, who numbered approximately 300 at the time of Washington's visit. The Newport Christian community's acceptance of Jewish worship was exemplary, although individual Jews, such as Aaron Lopez and Isaac Elizer, were unable to obtain full political equality as citizens of Rhode Island. The Jews of Newport looked to the new national government, and particularly to the enlightened President of the United States, to remove the last of the barriers to religious liberty and civil equality confronting American Jewry.

Moses Seixas's letter on behalf of the congregation described them as "the children of the Stock of Abraham" and expressed the Jewish community's esteem for President Washington and desire to join "with our fellow citizens in welcoming [him] to Newport." The congregation expressed its pleasure that the God of Israel, who had protected King David, had also protected General Washington. They also believed that the same spirit which resided in the bosom of Daniel and allowed him to govern over the "Babylonish Empire" now rested upon Washington. While the rest of world Jewry lived under the rule of monarchs, potentates, and despots, as American citizens, the members of the congregation were part of a great experiment: a government "erected by the

Majesty of the People,” to which they could look to ensure their “invaluable rights as free citizens.”

Seixas expressed his vision of an American government in words that have become a part of the national lexicon. He beheld in the United States

...a Government which to bigotry gives no sanction, to persecution no assistance—but generously affording to All liberty of conscience, and immunities of citizenship: deeming every one, of whatever nation, tongue or language equal parts of the great Governmental Machine:— This so ample and extensive federal union whose basis is Philanthropy, mutual confidence, and public virtue, we cannot but acknowledge to be the work of the Great God, who ruleth the Armies of Heaven, and among the Inhabitants of the Earth, doing whatsoever seemeth [to Him] good.

Seixas closed his letter to the President by asking God to send the “Angel who conducted our forefathers through the wilderness into the promised land [to] conduct [Washington] through all the difficulties and dangers of this mortal life.” He told Washington of his hope that “... when like Joshua full of days, and full of honour, you are gathered to your Fathers, may you be admitted into the Heavenly Paradise to partake of the water of life, and the tree of immortality.”

Not surprisingly, it is Washington’s response, rather than Seixas’s epistle, which is best remembered and most frequently reprinted. Washington began by thanking the congregation for its good wishes and rejoicing that the days of hardship caused by the war were replaced by days of prosperity. Washington then borrowed ideas and actual words directly from Seixas’s letter:

The Citizens of the United States of America have a right to applaud themselves for giving to Mankind examples of an enlarged and liberal policy: a policy worthy of imitation. All possess alike liberty of conscience and immunities of citizenship. It is now no more that toleration is spoken of, as if it was by the indulgence of one class of people that another enjoyed the exercise of their inherent natural rights. For happily the Government of the United States, which gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance, requires only that they who live under its protection, should demean themselves as good citizens.

Washington’s concluding paragraph perfectly expresses the ideal relationship among the government, its individual citizens, and religious groups:

May the Children of the Stock of Abraham, who dwell in this land, continue to merit and enjoy the good will of the other Inhabitants; while everyone shall sit under his own vine and fig tree, and there shall be none to make him afraid.

Washington closed with an invocation: “May the father of all mercies scatter light and not darkness in our paths, and make us all in our several vocations useful here, and in his own due time and way everlastingly happy.”

This correspondence articulates the foundation principles of American religious liberty and the principle of separation between church and state. Although the letter is simply a letter, it is this principle that becomes enshrined in our Constitution. America is a place where there will be no official state church, no government sponsored with each religious group free to practice, believe, preach, teach, interpret, and observe, free from government regula-

tion. America would not be a place where the police would come to close a synagogue down. On the contrary, the State has the obligation to protect the rights of its citizens to worship in freedom and security. "To bigotry, no sanction."

19th century: An Assault

From the diary of Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise:

I went to the synagogue on New Year's morning appeared in my official garb but found one of my opponents sitting in my chair. I took another seat. Excitement ruled the hour. Everything was quiet as the grave... I stepped before the ark in order to take out the scrolls of the law as usual and to offer prayer. The opponent stepped in my way, and without saying a word, snore me with his fist so that my cap fell from my head. This was the terrible signal for an uproar the likes of which I had never experienced... Within two minutes the whole assembly was a struggling mass. The sheriff and his posse who were summoned were belabored and forced out until finally the whole assembly surged out of the house into the street.

That account vividly describes the assault made upon Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise in 1850 on Rosh Hashanah morning in Albany, New York. A group within the congregation vehemently opposed certain changes in ritual practice that Wise had instituted, resulting in the riot and Wise's departure for Cincinnati, where he would establish a new congregation that would become a strong foothold for Reform Judaism in America. We are here, in part, because of Rabbi Wise's strength, courage, creativity, and conviction. I like to say that Rabbi Wise didn't take a sock on the jaw so that we would feel in any way indifferent or sheepish about our Judaism. Just as George Washington's letter is symbolic of America's commitment

to religious freedom, so Wise's brawl is a dramatic symbol for the revolution he created and his dream for American Judaism.

Wise did not set out to create a movement of Reform Judaism in America. He set out to create an American Judaism that reflected the American culture. Rabbi Wise was rather moderate as a reformer. He was very much a traditionalist. According to accounts of the period, Rabbi Wise used to walk around Cincinnati on Shabbat afternoon and berate the Jewish shopkeepers whose stores were open. The Jewish community of the mid-19th century in this country was totally lacking in Jewish learning and education. It was a leaderless community largely lacking in rabbis. The few rabbis that did come from Europe usually stayed for a short time only to return. They could not imagine bringing Jewish life to such a wild, untamed country. There was almost nothing in the way of an organized synagogue. There were some prayer groups, burial societies, cemeteries. It was impossible to keep kosher, as there were almost no kosher butchers, and few adhered to the uniform standard of ritual slaughtering practices. The Jewish communities in the various cities were totally lacking in funds. The few rabbis that remained in America left the rabbinare and took up other trades and crafts as a way of earning a living.

Rabbi Wise had a vision for American Judaism. He envisioned a Judaism that was rooted in America and that reflected its culture. To that end, he founded Hebrew Union College, the first rabbinical school in North America, to educate rabbis for the new world. He then founded the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, which he envisioned as a federation of congregations across the country that would support his rabbinical school. Finally, for graduates of his rabbinical seminary, he created the Central Conference of American Rabbis, a professional organization to provide a voice of rabbinic leadership,

ongoing study, and a forum for rabbinic discussion and creativity.

What today seems so self-evident, in Wise's day was anything but. Let us consider what he did. First and foremost, he realized that America would require a native homegrown English-speaking rabbinate. Those few rabbis who had made the trek from Europe were hampered by obstacles of language and culture. Next, in organizing a rabbinical school, he followed the model of the emerging liberal rabbinical seminaries of Europe, where the students studied for the rabbinate while simultaneously pursuing a university education. He sought to synthesize Jewish learning with Western culture. In organizing a congregational Union, Wise sought funding not only for his seminary but also intuited something much deeper about American culture: democracy. He knew that the American synagogue would be a partnership between the laity and the rabbi, and sought to support both. Viewing American democracy as an open marketplace of ideas, he sought to create an American synagogue Union that could speak with a Jewish voice on the issues of the day. By creating a rabbinical conference, he sought the same thing for rabbis.

Wise initially sought to build these institutions to serve all American Jewry, but he was too much the reformer. The Orthodox would not march under his banner. Other Jewish movements would create their own institutions, all following his model. Isaac Mayer Wise's sock on the jaw laid the basis for the creation of the great Jewish institutions that support and sustain Reform Judaism today, as well as the model for organized Jewish religious life in this country.

20th century: A War

Many of us are old enough to remember the events leading up to Israel's Six-Day War of June, 1967. I was fourteen at the time. The

crisis built slowly, as Egyptian forces gathered in Sinai and Syrian troops formed along the Golan Heights. The shelling of Israeli settlements from the heights in the North was incessant. Nasser of Egypt ordered the U.N. Peacekeeping Force out of Sinai, and the noose seemed to tighten around the Israelis. Finally, Egypt closed the port of Eilat by blocking the Straits of Tiran. Israel appealed to the United States to honor its commitment to keep the port open. Bogged down by Vietnam, President Lyndon Johnson equivocated and did not want to commit himself on another front. Israel seemed isolated and alone. The headlines from Egypt screamed death. Egypt and Syria were going to meet in Tel Aviv and push the Jews into the sea. Jews around the world looked on in horror. Israel mobilized its reserve army and waited. My Hebrew teacher, Mr. Damenshtein, an Israeli, went back to Israel when he heard his unit had been called up. The country came to a standstill. And then the miracle happened. The Israeli Air Force struck and the army pushed the Egyptians out of Sinai, the Syrians off of the Golan Heights, and the Jordanians across the river.

This is the event that put Israel four-square on the agenda of the American Jewish community. Moshe Dayan was on the cover of *TIME* magazine. American Jews revelled in the glory. Who can forget the *LIFE* magazine photos of Israeli soldiers swimming in the Suez Canal?

We cannot overestimate the impact that this war had on the American Jewish psyche. There was not going to be another Holocaust. Israel was safe and secure, strong and independent. It was more than that. Being Jewish was in. Israel was hot. In the days as the war approached, American Jewish fundraising for Israel was prodigious. The memories of Auschwitz were still fresh. The questions were just beginning to form. Had American Jews done enough for European Jews during World War II? American Jews

were determined that this question was not going to be asked about American Jews and Israel. Israel was everywhere.

For me, these three pivotal events in American Jewish history stand out. The question is, what impact do they have on us? How have they affected our story? Do they change the way we see ourselves and interpret our lives as Jews? My answer is that George Washington's letter and Wise's fistfight don't have much resonance for us. I wish they had more. More on that tomorrow morning. The story after the Six-Day War can be told by almost anyone of us.

Elie Wiesel has written that the Six-Day War provided world Jewry the confidence to remember the Holocaust. Thus was born the two-part program of American Jews: remembering the Holocaust and advocating for Israel. This became our story. Jewish identification was self-evident. What it meant to be an American Jew was obvious; it meant having a foreign policy. Our role was to save Jews everywhere in the world. We marched and picketed and wrote letters to "Save Soviet Jewry." All of this was our story – *was* our story – because now it no longer is. It still may serve for some of us, but try asking anyone under the age of thirty-five. For more and more of us over the age of thirty-five, it doesn't work either. When I say that we are "community" looking for a story, I mean that we need something to bind us together. Otherwise we are consumers, and everyone around us is our competitor for the goods and services that Judaism offers.

But, we have the outline of our emerging story in the three pivotal events that I have selected here. We have embraced America as a land of freedom, and we are called to be defenders of that freedom wherever we are. Isaac Mayer Wise unleashed a chapter of religious reform; every time we make a ritual change, sing a new liturgical melody, or are inspired by a poem during our worship, we are celebrating the religious creativity that Wise unlocked.

Finally, our connection to Israel reminds us that even as we celebrate and champion our freedom as Americans and revel in our Jewish creativity, we remain bound to our ancient teaching: "*Kol Yisrael Arevim Zeh Bazeh*, All Israel is responsible for one another." As we weave these ideals into our very lives, we are responding to Jacob Neusner's challenge.

Shanah Tovah!

From Beyond the Text Laurence Hoffman

1987

not birth physically speaking, at least. Girls too are born, but their birth goes completely unrecognized in rabbinic liturgical ritual, after all. The only reason the birth of boys seems to be a matter of cultural recognition is that boys, unlike girls, are admitted into conventional status, and the ritual that accomplishes that rite of passage happens to take place at a moment sufficiently close to the moment of birth. To moderns, who care about birthdays anyway, it appears to correspond to the moment of birth, which is still fresh in our mind.

If, now, we consider together our two separate instances of liturgical ritual—fast-day worship and the *brit milah* ceremony for initiating boy-children into the covenant—we find that in both cases women are without independent sociologically meaningful existence; that is, they exist only by virtue of belonging within the orbit of men. No wonder the Mishnah must allot an entire order to determining what to do with these female creatures who are liable to change orbits, and hence status, *vis-à-vis* the men who chance to encounter them.²⁶ Unlike the moment of their births, the movement of these women to and from the orbits of different men will be marked by appropriate liturgical ceremonial, but even then, women will never actively betroth, marry, or divorce; they will be betrothed, married, and divorced, for not they but their husbands stand in covenantal relationship to God, and thus may initiate action with covenantal consequences. To be sure, all living beings are recipients of God's mercy, so that women too may remain personally involved with the Creator of all. But for rituals calling for representatives of the covenanted people to stand before God—as here, in the fast-day prayer—only those with covenantal status are counted. So a man addresses other men and recalls ancestors who were other men still. If there were women present, they go unaddressed and unrecognized. Not covenanted themselves, they are not considered paradigmatic as group petitioners, and they are excluded in a ritual that calls for a man to represent God's people.

To those schooled in liturgy as a textual discipline, it may seem that our example goes far afield. The whole point of this book is precisely that it does not. We managed to combine two discrete liturgical examples that seemed on the face of it to have little in common, and in so doing, to say something about the system of signification that dominated the way the rabbis carved up experience. I do not mean to suggest that my own expansion of the question before us is in any way definitive; some may even find it trivial (though I do not). At any rate, I have not taken pains here to analyze the matter in all its detail so as to prove this particular case. It was intended only as an example of where, tentatively, one might open up new avenues of exploration. Nor do I maintain (either here or in the chapters that follow, for that matter) that I have managed to manufacture the final set of correct questions for which solutions may even be available. At this point, I want only to take an instance of liturgy as it has been studied, and studied with some success, by prominent representatives of both liturgical schools of thought avail-

able in the literature, so as to demonstrate their competence at their craft, and their understandable hesitancy to violate the boundaries of that craft by including questions beyond its ability to offer solutions. ~~They could and did talk as much about the liturgical texts that people used. They did not talk as much about the people using them.~~ Even if it should turn out that the additional questions raised here with regard to fast-day liturgy are not fully answerable—even if, that is, the example of fast-day worship does not immediately lend itself to a successful demonstration of going from a prayer text to the community who prays it—my intention is that the studies in succeeding chapters will.

Perhaps an image is in order before I proceed further. Michael Polanyi speaks of a pre-given Gestalt governing perception, and Gregory Bateson describes what he calls predefined systems of meaning.²⁷ In both cases, we are warned against limiting our view to the particular concatenation of stimuli—or, in our case, data—that we prejudice as somehow existing independently of its constituent units, on the one hand, and of the larger field of reality in which it exists, on the other. We are in the situation of watching a television screen and being warned not to confuse the two-dimensional picture rendered by the camera crew for the totality of reality on the site of the program's shooting. What we wish to be able to do is to control the camera, allowing it to sweep back and forth, including and excluding this or that part of reality, regularly zeroing in and then stepping back, constantly changing the center of focus, until we have a good mastery of the whole, not just a single part that happens to fit conveniently on the screen. Polanyi calls this mastering not only the focus but the subsidiary, and concludes, "Scientific discovery reduces our focal awareness of observations into a subsidiary awareness of them, by shifting our attention from them to their theoretical coherence."²⁸ Studies have hitherto isolated one element in the act of worship—the text—until it emerged as the focus. But we are our own camera operator. We can, if we like, swing the camera around at the other aspects of worship, until the text becomes subsidiary, and we discover a new coherence to worship that does justice to the people performing it. Since this is an attempt to integrate the entire act of worship into the study of liturgy, I should like to call it holistic.²⁹

Even a holistic integration of data requires some predetermined notion of the set of questions that will be raised, and it is this to which I alluded when I said above that our example of the fast-day liturgy combined with the ritual of *brit milah* led us to "the system of signification that dominated the way the rabbis carved up experience." I can think of no better general description of what I am about than that suggested by Clifford Geertz, whose self-conscious analysis of his own craft sounds remarkably like what is being suggested here.

The thing to ask about a burlesqued wink or a mock sheep raid is not what their ontological status is. It is the same as rocks on one hand and dreams on the other—

they are things of this world. The thing to ask is what their import is: what it is, ridicule or challenge, irony or anger, snobbery or pride, that in their occurrence and through their agency, is getting said.³⁰

What goes for "a burlesqued wink or a mock sheep raid" goes equally for a prayer. Unless we know the cultural significance of "what is getting said," we flatter ourselves by thinking we know anything at all of liturgical importance.

Geertz pictures the field anthropologist watching some people going about their daily rituals, and asking the shaman what is transpiring. The shaman has never been asked before. But now, so as to satisfy the anthropologist, our shaman concocts an explanation. This, Geertz labels a construction of reality, rather than reality itself. The verbal explanation is one step removed from the reality of the ritual being described. But the matter does not end there. The anthropologist returns to his or her study to fashion a scholarly account of the shaman's interpretation. The native language will have to be translated into terms familiar to modern Western culture. It will be in English, say, and fit into the straitjacket of current anthropological jargon. What emerges is removed yet a step further from the reality of ritual in action; it is now a construction of a construction. Geertz concludes, "What we call our data are really our own constructions of other people's constructions of what they and their compatriots are up to. . . . Analysis, then, is sorting out the structures of significance."³¹ What should interest us, therefore are the liturgical "structures of significance." We too have reports by shamans, so to speak; that is to say, the writers of records regarding the ritual life of the Jewish people in times past. What is this documentary evidence that we have inherited from times past, if not constructions of reality; and who are the authors, if not each generation's experts in the rules governing the propriety of Jewish ritual and in the interpretation of its religious signification? We must learn to utilize the discussions and reports in ancient and medieval sources as if they were answers to hypothetical anthropologists, ourselves, whose task it is to go back in time and ask, "What are you doing, and why?"

To be sure, the reorientation I suggest is not easily arrived at. Since people take their rituals for granted, they rarely stop to suggest what they think they are doing by them. In Geertz's instance, it is only the actual presence of the anthropologist that results in the shaman's remarks; in our own case, what we have is less an ordered interpretation arranged to suit our enquiries than it is a random recounting of significance contained within a literary corpus that was designed with wholly other rules of organization. Still, we have a lot: prayer books, of course; and legends and myths and stories about the world's composition; and theological assertions; and seemingly endless documentation of legal debate over details of ritual behavior. Even when, as in these instances, the medium of communication between generations past and present remains our texts, what is

communicated need not be confined to textual information. A debate in the Talmud, for example, may tell us something about the status of the Haggadah text at that time, and it is this information that is, strictly speaking, textual, and that scholars have been interested in primarily; but it may also tell us something about the people who lived then, how they viewed Passover eve, and what they anticipated in their seder ceremony. This is the sort of information that should interest us here.

Furthermore, we have the nonliterary sources, the music and art of previous eras: the mosaic floor at the synagogue of Beth Alpha, or the biblical panorama at that of third-century Dura Europus; fifteenth-century Haggadah representations of Elijah and the messiah; the shape of synagogues in American suburbs; nineteenth-century art music in Germany, but guitars at youth camps in twentieth-century United States. None of this is irrelevant. Everything is potentially pregnant with meaning. What did people argue about? What did they envision? What did they act out? Who did the acting? What were—and what now are—the structures of signification?

At times, we shall discover that this sort of investigation is not amenable to the same sort of rigorous proofs that the science of textual analysis demands, because the rules of the textual game permit us to limit the scope of its enquiry in advance to that range of topics about which such certainty is *a priori* demonstrable. Unfortunately, items of cultural signification are not on that list; were we to insist on an equal degree of confirmation here, we should have to abandon our task at the outset. Naturally, we shall require considerable evidence for any claims we make, but in essence, the nature of a claim regarding a medieval Jew's notion of sacred history, or the role of synecdochal vocabulary in apprehending the numinous—to take as illustrative two items discussed in the pages that follow—differs from that of a claim regarding the presence or absence of any given word in a specific edition of this or that prayer book. The latter claim is textual and thus patently provable by formally agreed-upon conventions of defining certainty. The former questions are not.

But it is those questions that occupy us here, since this book is intended for those who, like myself, want to know exactly this: what liturgy is all about. This group is essentially a "newly evolved species" of liturgists, of whose "interdisciplinary character" Daniel Stevick writes:

The group that represents passionate commitment to liturgy is extremely diverse—historians, theologians, artists, architects, musicians, poets, dancers. Some teach, some write—at a range of levels; some are in close touch with parishes; some work with children; some serve with official worship commissions. Some are themselves creative people in liturgy. Some study the creativity of others. The list could go on and on. [The important thing is that] all recognize the need of one another. . . . To be a liturgist is not to be one sort of thing.³²

From Moral Grandeur & Spiritual Audacity

AJH



ed. Susannah Heschel
1996

In Search of Exaltation

IN MY CHILDHOOD and in my youth I was the recipient of many blessings. I lived in the presence of quite a number of extraordinary persons I could revere. And just as I lived as a child in their presence, their presence continues to live in me as an adult. And yet I am not just a dwelling place for other people, an echo of the past. I am guided by the principle that the future is wiser than the present. I am basically an optimist. I am an optimist against my better judgment.

I seek to understand the present and the future while I disagree with those who think of the present in the past tense. I consider in my own intellectual existence that the greatest danger is to become obsolete. I try not to be stale, I try to remain young. I have one talent and that is the capacity to be tremendously surprised, surprised at life, at ideas. This is to me the supreme Hasidic imperative: Don't be old. Don't be stale. See life as all doors. Some are open, some are closed. You have to know how to open them.

But what is the key? The key is a song. As was the case with the Jew in the Hasidic story who is suddenly taken by surprise. A Cossack comes to his house and says: "I hear you are a cantor. Sing me a song." The poor Jew does not understand Russian, but fortunately his wife does. "He wants you to sing a *niggun*, a song," she tells her husband. The Jew is frightened, but still he sings a *niggun*; not a sad song, but an honest one. And when he finishes the Cossack beats him up. "Why does he beat me?" he asks his wife in bewilderment. She in turn asks the Cossack, who replies that he didn't like that *niggun*, he wants another. The Jew sings another *niggun* and the Cossack doesn't like that one either. And the Jew gets another beating.

Maybe this is my life. I always try to sing a *niggun*. I write one book

and the Cossack gives me a beating. So I try to write another. The Cossack may well be my greatest benefactor.

Perhaps the Cossack can be important to America, too. Nowadays when I think about the destiny of America I am very sad. Having lived in Poland and later in Germany, I know what America really means. For generations America was the great promise, the great joy, the last hope of humanity. Ten years ago if I had said to students that America is a great blessing and an example to the world, they would have laughed at me. Why speak such banalities? Today one of the saddest experiences of my life is to observe what is happening to America morally. The world once had a great hope, a great model: America. What is going to happen to America?

And here I return to the subject of blessings and how they come sometimes as blessings and sometimes in the guise of a curse. Like that Cossack.

We have a major curse in America today, the epidemic of drug addiction. Sometimes I have a strange feeling that this problem may be a blessing in the form of a curse. Perhaps this will wake us up to discover that we have gone the wrong way.

I interpret the young people's escape to drugs as coming from their driving desire to experience moments of exaltation. In my youth, growing up in a Jewish milieu, there was one thing we did not have to look for and that was exaltation. Every moment is great, we were taught, every moment is unique. Every moment can do such great things.

Jewish education may not have trained us in the art of relaxation, but our tradition did teach us something else. If I was rich as a child and as a young man, it was because I was offered numerous moments of exaltation, one after the other, in my home, in the synagogue, among my family and elders. Today, in America, Jews may have learned how to relax, but we have not learned the sources of exaltation. Man cannot live by sedatives alone. He needs not only tranquilizers and sedatives, he also needs stimulants.

In search of exaltation man is ready to burn Rome, even to destroy himself. It is difficult for a human being to live on the same level, shallow, placid, repetitious, uniform, ordinary, unchanged. The classical form of exaltation is worship. Prayer lifts a person above himself. Life without genuine prayer is a wasteland.

But exaltation is gone from the synagogue, from the church, and also from many a classroom and university. The cardinal sin is boredom, and the major failure the denial to our young of moments of exaltation. We have shaped our lives around the practical, the utilitarian, devoid of dreams and vision, higher concerns and enthusiasms. And our religious leadership suffers from a me-too attitude toward fad and fashion, accommodation and progressive surrender.

Our life thus devours the wisdom of religious tradition without deriving from it sources of renewal and uplift. Reduced to a matter of expediency, the entire image of man becomes flat. The sickness of our technological civilization has at least reached our consciousness, although the depths of that sickness have yet to be plumbed.

Young people are being driven into the inferno of the drug culture in search of high moments. Add to this the tremendous discontent of youth and its cry for justice for the disadvantaged, its disgust with halfhearted commitments and hypocrisies, and we may have the beginning of a thirst for the noble and the spiritual. The drug addict may well turn out to be the tragic witness who will guide adults into the realization that man without God eventually becomes insane.

Man is born to be concerned with ultimate issues. When he refuses to care, he ceases to be human. In this country, from top to bottom, from philosophy department to kindergarten, there is a violent disregard of such issues in favor of preoccupation with linguistic subtleties and semantics. The country at large is in frantic search of immediate comfort, instant pleasure, instant satisfaction, quick achievement.

This is the challenge. The new witnesses for a revival of the spirit in America may well be those poor miserable young men and women who are victims of the narcotics epidemic. If we will but heed the warning and try to understand their misguided search for exaltation, we can begin the task of turning curse into blessing.