The Essential Agus

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I

JACOB B. AGUS—AN
INTRODUCTORY OVERVIEW

Steven T. Katz

LIFE

JACOB AGUS (Agushewitz) was born into a distinguished rabbinical family in the month of Heshvan 5671—corresponding to November 2, 1911—in the shtetl of Sislevitch (Swislocz), situated in the Grodno Dubornik region of Poland. Descended through both parents from distinguished rabbinical lines (his mother being a member of the Katz-nellenbogen family), the young Agus, one of a family of seven children—four boys and three girls—early on showed signs of intellectual and religious precocity. After receiving tutoring at home and in the local heder, he joined his older brothers, Irving and Haim, as a student at the Mizrachi-linked Tachnemoni yeshiva in Bialystock. Here he continued his intensive talmudic and classical studies, winning high praise as an illui (a genius) from the faculty of the yeshiva, and also began to be exposed to the wide variety of Jewish lifestyles and intellectual positions—ranging from secularist and bundist to Hasidic—that existed among Eastern European Jews. Raised in an almost totally Jewish environment, he knew little Polish and had limited relations with the non-Jewish world.

In the mid-1920s, as economic and political conditions worsened in Poland, many members of the Jewish community of Sislevitch emigrated to Palestine. This migratory wave also included the Agushewitzes, who arrived in Palestine in 1925. Unfortunately, the economic conditions and the religious life of the Yishuv, the emerging Jewish community in the land of Israel, were not favorable, and the Agushewitz
family, including Jacob, now sixteen, moved again in 1927. This time they traveled to America, where Jacob's father, R. Yehuda Leib, had relocated one year earlier to fill the position of rabbi in an East Side New York synagogue. R. Yehuda Leib later became a *schochet* (ritual slaughterer).

The family settled in Boro Park (Brooklyn), and Jacob, who already was able to read and write in English at a high school level, attended the high school connected with Yeshiva University. This marked a turning point in his personal life, for in this American yeshiva not only did students pursue a talmudic curriculum but—on the ideological presumption that all true human knowledge, the whole of creation, reflected God's wondrous ways—they were also exposed to a wide variety of secular and scientific subjects. For the remainder of his life, Jacob Agus would adhere to this religious-philosophical model.

After completing high school, Jacob attended the recently established Yeshiva University, where he continued both his rabbinical and secular studies, distinguishing himself in the secular realm in the areas of mathematics and science. He was so good at chemistry that he was encouraged to attend courses in this subject at Columbia University, which he did. He even briefly flirted with the idea of graduate work in chemistry. However, his deepest, commitment was to Jewish studies and to the Jewish people, and he therefore chose a rabbinical career. A favorite of the founder and president of Yeshiva University, R. Bernard Revel, and the outstanding student of R. Moshe Soloveitchik, the head of the rabbinical school, Agus received his rabbinical ordination (*smicha*) in 1933. After two further years of intensive rabbinical study, Agus received the traditional "Yadin Yadin" *smicha* in 1935, an ordination intended to place Agus on the same level as those rabbinical students who graduated from the European yeshivas and to enable him to act as a *Poseik* (halakic, or legal, decision maker).

While still at Yeshiva University, Agus also served as an assistant to R. Leo Jung, a distinguished member of the American Orthodox rabbinate. In this role, at R. Jung's request, he researched the basis for requiring a *mechitza* (a partition between men and women) in the synagogue and concluded that there was no firm biblical or rabbinical basis for this halakic requirement—an early sign of important decisions to come.

After graduation from Yeshiva University in 1935, Agus took his first full-time rabbinical position in Norfolk, Virginia. Here he began to
learn the trade of an active pulpit rabbi while continuing his Jewish education. Foremost among his educational pursuits at this time was an intensive study of midrash (the rabbinic commentaries on the Bible), guided, via the mail, by Professor Louis Ginsberg of the (Conservative) Jewish Theological Seminary of America, the great authority on midrash.

Having satisfied himself that with this control of the vast midrashic material, along with his talmudic erudition, he had reached a sufficiently well-rounded knowledge of classical Jewish materials, Agus began to pursue further secular studies in a serious and concentrated way. Convinced that these pursuits required a more intensive academic environment, he left Norfolk in 1936 for Harvard University, where he enrolled in the graduate program in philosophy. At Harvard his two main teachers were Professor Harry A. Wolfson, a master student of the history of Jewish philosophy, and Professor Ernest Hocking, a metaphysician of distinction.

While in the Boston area, Agus paid his way by taking on a rabbinical position in Cambridge and continued his rabbinical learning with R. Joseph Soloveitchik, the son of his Yeshiva University mentor, with whom he quickly formed a close friendship. For several years, Agus and the younger Soloveitchik met weekly to study Maimonides' philosophical and rabbinical works, as well as to discuss a host of more contemporary theological and halakic issues.

It was also in Boston that Agus met his future wife, Miriam Shore, the daughter of Bernard Shore, a Lithuanian Jew who had immigrated to America and become a Boston businessman. The Aguses married in 1940, with R. Joseph Soloveitchik officiating.

Harvard, however, was not all joy. In this great center of learning Agus for the first time in his life encountered serious, even intense, criticism of traditional Judaism. In response, he decided to devote a good deal of his energy for the remainder of his life to explicating, disseminating, and defending the ethical and humanistic values embodied in the Jewish tradition, particularly as these values were interpreted by its intellectual and philosophical elites, beginning with the Prophets and running through Philo, Saadya, Maimonides; and such modern intellectual giants as Hermann Cohen and R. Abraham Isaac Kook. Agus' first step on this path was his doctoral dissertation, published in 1940 under the title Modern Philosophies of Judaism, which critically examined the thought of the influential German triumvirate of Her-
mann Cohen, Franz Rosenzweig, and Martin Buber, as well as the work of Mordecai Kaplan, who in 1934 had published the classic *Judaism as a Civilization* that established his reputation as the leading American Jewish thinker.

After receiving his doctorate from Harvard, and with the encouragement of R. Revel, who wished to strengthen the foundations of modern Orthodoxy in the Midwest, Agus accepted the post of rabbi at the Agudas Achim Congregation in Chicago. Though the congregation permitted mixed seating, it was still considered an Orthodox synagogue. In this freer midwestern environment, removed from the yeshiva world of his student days, the orthodoxy of Yeshiva University, and the intensity of Jewish Boston, Agus began to have doubts about the intellectual claims and dogmatic premises of Orthodox Judaism. In particular, he began to redefine the meaning of halakah and its relationship to reason and independent ethical norms. Encouraged in this direction by Chicago’s leading Conservative rabbi, Solomon Goldman, and by the radical reconstructionism of Mordecai Kaplan, Agus had initiated the process of philosophical and theological reconceptualization that would define his increasingly revisionist and non-Orthodox thought.

In 1943, disenchanted with his Chicago pulpit, Agus accepted a call to Dayton, Ohio, where three small synagogues merged to form a liberal Orthodox congregation that became a Conservative congregation during his tenure. Given the proximity of Dayton to Cincinnati, he began an ongoing and cordial dialogue with the faculty and students of the Reform movement’s Hebrew Union College (HUC). In particular, Agus became a colleague of R. Abraham Joshua Heschel, who had fled war-torn Europe and taken up a position at HUC. Like Agus, Heschel was the heir of a great rabbinical family and a master of all branches of classical Jewish and rabbinical learning, with a special affinity for the thought of Maimonides. Alienated from the “tone” of classical Reform, which still dominated HUC, Heschel became a regular visitor at the Agus home on Sabbaths and holidays, and Agus and Heschel formed a lifelong intellectual and personal collaboration that later manifested itself in joint efforts to alter the curriculum and character of the Jewish Theological Seminary, whose faculty Heschel joined in 1945, and in common undertakings on behalf of Jewish–Christian dialogue and various political causes.

Because of this intensive rethinking of modern Jewish thought—and perhaps also as a consequence of his engagement with Heschel—Agus
turned his attention to the thought of R. Abraham Isaac Kook, the remarkable mystical personality who had served as the first chief rabbi of modern Palestine after World War I. (Kook died in 1935.) The result was Agus' *Banner of Jerusalem*, published in 1946, which sought to explore Kook's neocabalistic, panentheistic notion of holiness (*kedusha*), that is, the doctrine that God's presence was suffused throughout creation and incarnated most concretely in the Jewish people, the land of Israel, and the Torah. Deeply impressed by Kook's intense spirituality and authentic mystical vision, Agus yearned to invigorate American Orthodoxy with something of the same visionary passion. Yet at the same time, his deep engagement with Kook's traditional cabalistic Weltanschauung persuaded Agus that this essentially medieval worldview was one he did not, and could not, share. Modern Judaism had need of much that Kook had to teach, but it required that Kook's lessons be made available through a different vehicle, in a form more suitable to the modern temperament.

At this point Agus still hoped he could achieve his goal of effecting meaningful religious and structural change within the parameters of the Orthodox community. Like Mordecai Kaplan, he now advocated the creation of a reconstituted, metadenominational Sanhedrin (supreme Jewish religious legislative body) that would possess the power to alter—to modernize—Jewish religious life and practice. Though several important members of the Orthodox rabbinate, including R. Leo Jung and R. Joseph Lookstein, apparently were sympathetic to this call in private, none, including R. Joseph Soloveitchik, would support it openly. This lack of support, as well as Agus' own increasingly expansive and universalist spiritual and intellectual odyssey—one that was ever more appreciative of Western, non-Jewish culture and ever more critical of what Agus took to be certain forms of Jewish parochialism and chauvinism—led him, after his failure to gather support for an agenda of change and halakic reform at the Orthodox Rabbinical Council of America (RCA) convention in 1944 and 1945, to break decisively with the organized Orthodox community and its institutions.

This repercussive decision also reflected his personal experience as a community rabbi in a relatively small midwestern town like Dayton; for here Agus faced several new challenges. First, he had to be the force behind the restructuring of three congregations into one new, cohesive synagogue. Second, he had to respond to the personal needs of a religiously diverse group of Jews. Third, in the face of the unfolding
catastrophe that engulfed the Jews of Europe, he had to offer Jews of limited learning who were attracted by the seductive options of assimilated life in America a Judaism that was intellectually and spiritually meaningful. Moreover, to his surprise he had discovered that he derived great satisfaction from his duties as a congregational rabbi. He enjoyed presenting sermons and lectures to his congregants—tasks at which he became very proficient, having hired a voice teacher to help him refine his oral delivery—meeting their pastoral needs, and even being active in the day-to-day affairs of the synagogue management; for example, he was very involved in the architectural design of the new sanctuary.

Disaffected from the Orthodox rabbinical community, Agus officially broke with the RCA in 1946–1947 and joined the Conservative movement’s Rabbinical Assembly. In this new context, by virtue of his rabbinical erudition, his Orthodox smicha, and the force of his personality, he became a powerful presence and an agent of change. Over against the conservative force exerted by Chancellor Louis Finkelstein and the great Talmudist Saul Leiberman, who between them controlled the faculty of the Jewish Theological Seminary, which in turn dominated the procedural processes of the Conservative movement, Agus, in consort with like-minded Conservative rabbis such as Solomon Goldman, Robert Gordis, Morris Adler, Milton Steinberg, Ben Zion Bokser, and Theodore Friedman, argued for a more open and dynamic halakic process within the movement.

As a first major step in this direction, Agus proposed that the Law Committee of the Conservative movement be restructured into the Committee on Jewish Law and Standards (CJLS)—a change in more than name, the rationale for which is explained in his essays in Guideposts in Modern Judaism. He was, in turn, appointed to this committee (and to others) and remained a member of it for nearly forty years, until his death.

One of the earliest and best examples of his view on how the halakah should be interpreted is reflected in the important “Responsum on the Sabbath” that was issued by the Committee on Jewish Law and Standards in 1950. This responsion stated that the use of electricity was permitted on the Sabbath and that riding to and from the synagogue on the Sabbath was also permitted. The first decision was arrived at by use of the traditional halakic process, with one major exception, and the second was justified as a takkanah (a rabbinic enactment) responding to
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the “needs of the hour.” Both instantiated Agus’ view that a reverent and reasoned approach to change and the admission of where the halakah was lacking were required to revitalize Judaism in the contemporary world.

It should also be remembered that these decisions were embedded in a lengthy report that placed central emphasis on a proposed program to “revitalize sabbath observance”; this was not merely a call for radical change and a capitulation to modernity. The program was to consist of standards to be promulgated for all United Synagogue member synagogues to lift the levels of observance. In the late 1940s and early 1950s observance by laypeople was extremely lax—few attended services, many worked, few had Friday-evening dinners, and many Jewish communal organizations held events that violated the Sabbath and at which nonkosher food was served.

R. Agus, impelled by a drive for honesty and integrity, held it wrong to encourage people to attend the synagogue on the Sabbath, with the knowledge that many individuals would have to drive there, and then to insist that driving was an averah (a sin). In general, he thought that in keeping with modern sensibilities and the intellectual levels of congregants, the primary emphasis should be placed on encouraging mitzvot and not on alleging averot. The doing of each mitzvah was a good in itself and would lead to the doing of other mitzvot. This positive view, stressing the appropriate performance of mitzvot, is expressed in Guideposts and was an underlying principle of Agus’ halakic decisions.

As a recognized halakist, Agus was also asked by the United Synagogue to defend the principle of mixed seating in two secular court cases—one in New Orleans and one in Cincinnati—both of which occurred in the early 1950s. In both cases a deceased person had left funds in his will to his synagogue on condition that the synagogue remain “traditional.” At the time of the deaths, both synagogues had separate seating for men and women, but they did not have a halakically acceptable mechitza. In fact, by 1950 both congregations wanted to introduce mixed seating, a move that prompted a minority group of congregants to sue for the retention of separate seating on the grounds that mixed seating was a violation of the tradition.

In response, Agus pointed out that neither synagogue had a mechitza and yet each had been considered traditional in the eyes of the now-deceased donor. Therefore, one could argue that mixed seating was no
less traditional than separate seating. He also explained the lack of any clear halakic basis for separate seating and the nature of change within the tradition.

To the Orthodox members of the Agudas ha-Rabbonim, the organization of European-trained rabbis, this was wholly unacceptable. They were engaged at the time in an effort to force all Orthodox synagogues to maintain a *mechitza* as a way of drawing a distinction between Orthodox and Conservative synagogues. In the early 1950s, under the aegis of R. Joseph Soloveitchik’s Halachah Committee, the Rabbinical Council of America issued a statement that *mechitzas* were required.

The Agudas ha-Rabbonim went further and issued a ruling that prayer within a synagogue without a kosher *mechitza* was not permitted and would not fulfill a person’s religious obligations. In the same ruling, they placed R. Agus in *herem* (excommunication) for teaching false ideas. Intermarriage with R. Agus and his immediate family was prohibited. It should be noted, however, that two of the *gedolai ha-dor* (recognized halakic authorities), R. Aharon Kitler and R. Moshe Feinstein, who were friends of R. Yehuda Leib A. Agushewitz, denied knowledge of and repudiated this action. Three other rabbis—Eisenstein, Groubard, and Greenfield—were also specifically placed in *herem*. However, several years later the leaders of the Agudas repudiated this document and claimed that it had never been properly executed.

In 1950, R. Agus accepted the position of rabbi at the newly formed Conservative congregation Beth El in Baltimore. A small congregation of some fifty families when he arrived, it grew over his three decades as its rabbi into a major congregation—so popular, in fact, that it had to restrict new memberships—and one of the premier Conservative synagogues in the United States.

In his role as community rabbi, Agus attended the daily morning minyan (prayer quorum), taught Mishnah or Talmud for ten to fifteen minutes to those who came, and always returned for the evening daily service as well. He visited the sick weekly, paid shivah (week-of-mourning) calls, attended committee meetings in the evenings, and met congregants at all hours. He gave serious forty-minute lectures to the men’s club each week, and hundreds of men attended on a regular basis. He did oral book reviews for the sisterhood. Agus also started adult education institutes for the whole community, attended by thousands. He planned the curriculum for the Beth El schools and taught the post-bar mitzvah class. He produced a siddur (prayer book) for everyday use that
allowed services to be of a moderate length. He also changed the
content of the services for late Friday night, Saturday morning, and
holidays in ways that retained the traditional core of the liturgy but
made the services more aesthetically pleasing, intellectually challenging,
and time-efficient. His approach to services included intellectual ser-
mons and beautiful congregational singing—all in a two-hour package.
Congregants came on time and participated.

As a consequence of all this effort, Beth El moved to new suburban
surroundings in 1960, reopened its membership rolls, and grew to a
congregation of more than fifteen hundred families. It was typical of
Agus that in the construction of the new building he worked closely
with the architects and designers to ensure that it would be both
aesthetic and Jewishly pleasing.

Here a word needs to be said about Agus’ view on the role of women
in the synagogue. Consistent with his more general theological position,
he felt that artificial barriers to the full participation of women should
be eliminated. However, he cautioned that societal change must occur
at a pace and in a manner that allowed people's sensibilities to evolve
and new means of order and value-teaching to develop. He was very
concerned that the family be strengthened, not weakened, and feared
that a radical transformation rather than measured progress on the role
of women would disrupt the family and social order. In line with this
understanding, he established a bar mitzvah ceremony on Friday nights
because the issue of a woman’s receiving an *aliyah* (call to the Torah)
had not yet been addressed by the Rabbinical Assembly. Once it was,
and once the assembly’s CJLS approved *aliyot* for women—with Agus’
active support as a member of the committee—he instituted the prac-
tice at Beth El. Likewise, when the counting of women in the minyan
was approved by the CJLS with Agus’ endorsement, Beth El followed
suit.

The issue of female rabbis proved more complex. Agus felt that the
CJLS should address the subissues of women as judges, witnesses, and
*shlichit tzibbur* (leaders of public prayer) before that of rabbi. For political
reasons, the Jewish Theological Seminary addressed the issue by setting
up a commission, whose report attempted to skirt these halakic issues.
R. Agus was upset at the process—he thought the report was deliber-
ately disingenuous in not addressing the other issues of status, since
everyone knew that once ordained, female rabbis would perform all of
the functions not addressed. Though he agreed with the result, he
disagreed with the process. Therefore, in a move that surprised both the left and the right, he led a group of Rabbinical Assembly members in rejecting the report’s recommendation.

During the 1950s, despite his congregational responsibilities, Agus continued his scholarly work. He was a regular contributor to a variety of Jewish periodicals, such as the *Menorah Journal*, *Judaism*, *Midstream*, and *The Reconstructionist*, and he served on several of their editorial boards. He also published on occasion in Hebrew journals. At the same time, he began to teach at Johns Hopkins University in an adjunct capacity, lecture at Bnai Brith institutes, and speak at colleges and seminaries around the country. In 1959 he published his well-known study *The Evolution of Jewish Thought*, an outgrowth of his lectures.

During this period, Agus also took an active interest in national and international affairs. A firm supporter of Franklin D. Roosevelt during the 1930s and 1940s and a supporter of the creation of the United Nations, he distrusted socialism and hated communism. However, he believed in the necessity of moderate dialogue with the Soviet Union and supported public figures such as Adlai Stevenson who advocated a less belligerent relationship with the USSR. He was a significant opponent of Senator Joseph McCarthy and openly fought McCarthyism, testifying on behalf of individuals who were under suspicion, and he invited Professor Owen Lattimore of Johns Hopkins University to lecture at Beth El. Agus fought for the limitation of nuclear weapons, even for nuclear disarmament. He even disregarded a federal requirement that Beth El build a nuclear shelter, arguing that such an action legitimated the idea of nuclear war. He supported the Civil Rights movement and efforts to desegregate Baltimore, though he opposed affirmative action programs as unfair and had a visceral fear of black inner-city violence, which threatened many Jewish shopkeepers. He was an early and consistent opponent of the Vietnam War and supported the antiwar political positions of Senators Eugene McCarthy and George McGovern. In the 1970s, Agus was an active participant in an interfaith group started by Sargent Shriver to discuss the intersection of religion and politics.

Beginning in 1968, Agus, while continuing his rabbinical duties in Baltimore, accepted a joint appointment as professor of Rabbinic Civilization at the new Reconstructionist Rabbinical College (RRC) in Philadelphia and at Temple University. Though not a reconstructionist, Agus had a long-standing relationship with Mordecai Kaplan, the
founder of the reconstructionist movement, and he respected what promised to be a serious and innovative rabbinical training program. Agus taught in this capacity until the end of the academic year in 1970, when he resigned from the RRC in a dispute over the curriculum and the amount of Talmud students should be required to learn. The faculty wanted to reduce the hours devoted to talmudic study, while Agus wanted to increase them. However, he retained his professorship at Temple University and continued to teach graduate courses at that institution until 1980, when he resigned and accepted an adjunct appointment at Dropsie College in Philadelphia. He held this position until 1985, when his health would no longer permit the heavy schedule of travel that professorship entailed. Agus also had served as visiting professor in 1966 at the Rabbinical Seminary in Buenos Aires, affiliated with the Jewish Theological Seminary of America.

In addition to formal teaching, R. Agus taught the members of the local rabbinate on numerous occasions over the years. When he first came to Baltimore, he assisted local Conservative and Reform rabbis on an informal basis. In later years he gave seminars to rabbis in the Baltimore-Washington area on a bimonthly basis. Agus came to be known as the “rabbi of the rabbis” in the Baltimore-Washington area, because rabbis from all denominations of Judaism came to him not only to learn but also for advice on both personal and halakic issues. While his teaching was well known, the personal contacts were in confidence. The rabbis did invite him to speak before their congregations on a regular basis; for example, for a number of years he was invited to give a series of four lectures a year as part of the Sunday Scholar Series at Washington (Reform) Hebrew Congregation. Also, over the years students at the Ner Israel ultra-Orthodox yeshiva in Baltimore would come to see Agus at his house late at night to study Talmud. This study was kept secret because if it had become known, it would have resulted in the students’ expulsion from Ner Israel.

Another environment in which Agus taught was Christian seminaries. He lectured at Woodstock (Jesuit), Union Theological in New York City, and St. Mary’s Seminary in Baltimore. St. Mary’s is the largest school for Catholic priests in the United States and is under the direct supervision of the Vatican. R. Agus was the first nonpriest, let alone Jew, officially authorized by the Vatican to teach Catholic seminarians. He lectured on the Jewish background and content of the Gospels for over ten years on a regular basis.
During the 1960s and 1970s, Agus was also active in projects that cut across the lines of Jewish organizational life. For example, he became involved in the recently founded organization of Jewish academic scholars and helped to establish a Jewish Philosophical Society. He worked with the American Jewish Committee at both the local and the national level on various communal issues, with the Synagogue Council of America on Jewish-Christian issues, and with a host of Jewish communal agencies.

In 1979–1980, Agus became part of a group of fifteen rabbis—five Orthodox, five Conservative, and five Reform—that was put together by the leaders of the Rabbinical Council of America (Orthodox), the Rabbinical Assembly (Conservative), and the Central Committee of American Rabbis (Reform) and that met in secret for a number of years to explore issues of theology and practice. Much of the early work of this group was based on papers prepared by Agus. He was very interested in and excited by this undertaking, as it brought him back into contact with people from Yeshiva University, including R. Joseph Lookstein, an old mentor. He found significant areas of commonality among the movements and even harbored some optimism that his quest to create a viable, religiously based Judaism for America would begin to move forward. Unfortunately, his illnesses and other factors aborted this effort.

From the 1950s, Agus likewise was active in the Jewish-Christian dialogue, in the hope of reducing anti-Semitism and helping to restructure the Christian understanding of Jews and Judaism. He worked closely with the American Jewish Committee in developing interfaith programs and was directly involved in relationships with Cardinal Bea that bore fruit in Vatican II. He worked with the National Council of Christians and Jews and actively participated in interfaith conversations, programs, and education at the local and state levels.


THOUGHT

Despite all his rabbinical teaching and public roles, Jacob Agus is best known as an important Jewish thinker and student of Jewish thought.
This scholarly activity, which spanned nearly half a century—beginning with his Harvard doctoral dissertation, which became his first book, *Modern Philosophies of Judaism* (1941)—covers an enormous historical and conceptual range, stretching from the biblical to the modern era. Nothing Jewish was alien to Agus, and his research and reflections involved talmudic, philosophical, and cabalistic sources, though quite clearly the philosophical material had pride of place.

In *Modern Philosophies of Judaism*, Agus undertook the task of explicating and criticizing the work of the great German Jewish thinkers Hermann Cohen, Franz Rosenzweig, and Martin Buber—Cohen and Rosenzweig being little known in America at the time—as well as the radical theology of Mordecai Kaplan. Among this group of seminal thinkers, Agus was attracted most especially to the work of Franz Rosenzweig: “The spirit which permeates his work perfecly escapes analysis. And that spirit is great and bright, glowing with the fire of God” (209). In particular, Agus was drawn to Rosenzweig's nonliteral, nonpropositional theory of revelation, which, he argued, “will be found to accord with an enlightened view of tradition and with the ways of thinking of the earnestly critical modern mind” (350). Cohen he found too abstract, his conception of God too distant from “the pattern of religious emotion” (126). Buber, whom Agus saw as a mystic, according to the criteria of mystical experience set out by William James,1 is criticized for his subjectivism—“Devotion uncontrolled by reason is a greater danger to society than selfishness, history proves abundantly. We find this truth scrawled all over the story of mankind, in letters of fire and blood” (276)—and for his rejection of rational, objective criteria in religious and ethical matters:

Those of us, however, who are constrained to judge the value of these “inner calls” by external standards, may well feel uneasy at the total absence of the rational element in the decision advocated by Buber. If only we were certain that the call came from God! But, what if Satan should intervene instead! How are we to tell the voice of the “Eternal Thou” from that of the “demonic Thou?” (Is not Hitler, too, a mystic?)

Alternatively, Kaplan, though described as a rationalist and a pragmatist, is found wanting because of internal contradictions within the structure of his thought, the inability “to develop [his] own conception of God to the point where it could serve as the basis of a life of religion” (315),
and an excessive nationalism that, if not carefully counterpoised by "a deep conviction in the reality of the universal value of ethics" (322), could lead to disastrous consequences.

But interestingly, beyond the systematic differences among his four subjects and his individual criticisms of their work, Agus found a common core in all of them. As distinctively Jewish thinkers, all were said to recognize that

the moral law appears in consciousness as an absolute command, spurning all selfish and unworthy motives. It can only be understood on its own face value, as an objective law of action, deriving from the structure of reality. An essential part of ethical experience is the feeling that there is an outside source to our judgments of right and wrong, that the stamp of validity attaches to our apprehensions of the rightness and wrongness of things.

This conviction is not only common to the philosophers discussed in this book; it constitutes the main vantage point of their respective philosophies. While they express this fluid intuition in radically different ways, they agree in founding their systems of thought upon it. (330)

This conviction was also Agus:

The intuition of the objective validity of ethical values must be taken into consideration. In moments of intense moral fervor, we feel that rightness and wrongness are eternally fixed in the scheme of things; that it is not our own personal dictates and impulses that are the source of ethical feeling; that the sense of authority attaching to our ethical judgment is not derived either from the opinions of other men or from the unconscious influence of society; that the things we call "good" and "bad" are similarly designated by the Eternal One, Who stands outside of us and yet dwells within us, speaking through our mouths in moments of great, ethical exaltation.

This intuition is the basis of my philosophy and religion. I believe it, not only because on many occasions it has come to me with dazzling clarity, but, far more because this insight has been shared by the great thinkers of humanity, in particular, by the religious geniuses of Israel. (340–41)

All his later philosophical reflections are predicated on this religio-ethical premise.
Agus' second book, *Banner of Jerusalem: The Life, Times and Thought of Abraham Isaac Kuk* (1946), intended as a complement to *Modern Philosophies of Judaism*, on its face dealt with a surprising subject for Agus, given his modernizing sympathies, his reservations about nationalism—including certain formulations of Zionism—and his often severe criticisms of cabala; for Rav Kook (Kuk) (b. 1865; d. 1935), the first Ashkenazi chief rabbi of modern Palestine (1919–1935), was, vis-à-vis halakah, a traditional rabbinical figure, an ardent religious Zionist, and the most original and creative cabalist of the twentieth century. Yet Agus, who shared much in the way of biography with R. Kook, was drawn to Kook's profound spirituality, his intense religious passion, his concern for all Jews, his support of the rebirth of all types of Jewish life in the renewed land of Israel, his unwaveringly religious Zionism, his mystical embrace of all things as part of the divine life, his respect for the religious potential of all men. Kook, for example, had written that

> it was indeed proper that the whole content of holiness should have reference to humanity in general, for the perception of holiness is universal and the content of holiness, the bond between man and God, is independent of any nationality. This universal content would, in that event, have appeared for Jews in a special Jewish garment, but the wave of moral perversion that set in later in world history caused the elements of holiness to be forgotten among all men. And a new creation was made in Israel. . . . Nevertheless, there are still titans of the spirit who find the cosmic element in the root of Adam's soul, which still throbs in the heart of mankind generally.²

Agus also was drawn to Kook's intense effort "to meet the manifold challenges of modernism thru [sic] the deepening of piety and the inclusion therein of the new and aggressive values" (Banner, 20) and to what Agus described in the "Preface to the Second Edition" of *Banner of Jerusalem* (reitled *High Priest of Rebirth*) as Kook's "generous, outgoing humanism" (*High Priest*, ix):

> The ritual of Judaism is designed to replenish the mystical springs of idealism in human society. Loyalty to Israel, [Kook] taught, was wholly in accord with unalloyed faithfulness to humanism, since Israel was "the ideal essence of humanity." With all his intense nationalism, he never allowed himself to forget that the ultimate justification of nationalism
consisted in the good that it might bring to the whole race of mankind.  
(High Priest, 240)

It is also most probable that Agus was drawn to R. Kook because he saw in various of R. Kook’s halakic enactments a prototype for his own halakic reforms. Thus, for example, one feels the passion in Agus’ reprise of Kook’s creative stand on the question of the observance of sh’mittah (the biblical law that in the seventh year the land should not be cultivated or worked) in the fledgling agricultural settlements of the renewed Jewish community in Palestine. R. Kook, developing an earlier ruling, allowed for sale of the land to a gentile as a way of circumventing the strict rule that agricultural work cease during the “sabbatical year of the land.” Despite intense opposition from many in the Orthodox community, Kook held firm, and his ruling was adopted by most of the religious agricultural settlements. Here is R. Agus’ description of R. Kook’s moral courage during and after this religious crisis:

Aware of the undeserved abuse heaped upon him by many who sought to make partisan, political capital out of the affair, but, certain of the rightness of his position, he did not permit even a drop of rancor to enter his mind. As soon as the storm of controversy subsided, the Jewish world in Palestine and abroad recognized in him, not only a great Talmudic scholar, but one of the gentle saints in Israel. Almost despite himself, he became a central figure in world Jewry, the symbol of brave and adventurous leadership in Orthodox Judaism and the hero for thousands of young yeshivah students in every part of the globe. Those who maintained that Orthodox Judaism was not rigid and petrified, hopelessly caught in the paralyzing grip of ancient law and doctrine, were able to point to the rabbi of Jaffa as proof of the pliancy, adaptability and courage of genuine Orthodox leadership. (High Priest, 83)

For Agus, this type of religious leadership was required more generally within the Orthodox world; and in certain real ways he worked to effect, as he saw it, similar halakic transformations within the orbit of American Jewry. What Agus said of R. Kook might also be taken as the theme of Agus’ own life’s work:

He transformed Orthodoxy by reviving the components of humanism and secular culture in the Jewish tradition. And he appealed to the
secularists to appreciate and reverence the depths of mystery, out of which spring man’s genuine values. He lived “on the boundary” between the sacred and the secular, between the mystique of particularism and the outreach of universalism. And it is to this boundary that we must find our way in every generation. (*High Priest*, xiii)

In 1954, R. Agus continued his significant publishing activity with a collection of essays titled *Guideposts in Modern Judaism*. In the opening essay, “The Impact of American Culture,” Agus expressed his admiration for American liberalism, his strong (correct) belief that Zionism cannot be a substitute religion for American Jews—though critical of this vicarious Zionism and various political forms of Zionism, he was a Zionist and defended the basic concept of a Jewish state in the land of Israel—his (correct) view that anti-Semitism is receding as an important issue in forming Jewish identity in America, his (correct) view that ethnicity is declining as a factor in Jewish identity in America, and his judgment that religion in America is distinctively pragmatic in tone and value. The second, quite provocative essay is an extended review and critique of various trends in the modern branches of Judaism. Agus is, not surprisingly, a keen critic of all the various conceptual efforts that have been advanced to explain, justify, or alter Judaism in the modern period. His critical comments on the philosophy of halakah of his former close friend, Rav Joseph Soloveitchik, are notable (37—44), while his own sympathy for the Conservative movement is clear in his analysis of that movement’s handling of halakic matters (133—37).

The third essay in *Guideposts*, “The Jewish Community,” revolves around the seminal issue of nationalism, that is, how and in what sense Judaism is Zionism. In particular, the essay is critical of Ahad Ha’Am’s and Mordecai Kaplan’s cultural form of Zionism and of the classical Zionist doctrine, espoused by David Ben-Gurion, among others, of “the negation of the diaspora” (*shelilat ha-golah*). (Agus was critical of all purely secular forms of Zionism, all forms of Zionism that called for the “normalization” of the Jewish people, and all efforts to deny the legitimacy of the *golah*—Jewish life outside the land of Israel.) In America, Judaism must dominate the Jewish agenda as religion, not nationalism. The fourth essay, “Ends and Means of Jewish Life in America,” originally published in the *Menorah Journal* in 1949, argues the same point but advances the argument by introducing an idea that henceforth would be central to Agus’ general position on Jewish matters: what he
Steven T. Katz
calls the “meta-myth” and defines as “that indeterminate but all-too-real plus in the consciousness of Jewish difference, as it is reflected in the minds of both Jews and Gentiles” (Guideposts, 181). For non-Jews, this meta-myth manifests itself in the belief that

the Jew is different in some mysterious manner. In the imagination of the untutored he may appear to be now partaking of divine qualities, now bordering on the diabolical, now superhuman in his tenacity, now subhuman in his spiteful determination to survive; but always, in some dim sense, the traditional stereotype of the Jew held by the Gentiles includes the apprehension of deep cosmic distinction from the rest of humanity.

This feeling has been reflected in the mythological substructure of antisemitism from its very origins. (Guideposts, 181)

Both positive and negative aspects of Jewish-Gentile relationships over time—and here Agus includes both anti-Semitism and Zionism—have been directed, affected, and shaped by this belief. But Agus opposes this myth in all its forms. Instead, he again argues for optimism about the status of the Jew in America and for the centrality of the religious dimension in American Jewish life. Agus’ moral idealism, his unceasing universalism, never wavers:

The true Jewish way is to rise above the hatred by recognizing it as a universal evil, found in ourselves as well as in others, and to labor for its cure both within ourselves and in the total society of which we are a part.

By cleaving to the spiritual interpretation of Jewish experience we provide a means for the non-religious among us to progress in the realm of the spirit through their Jewish identification. To be sure, we have now shown how the gulf in many men’s minds between adherence to spiritual values and the convictions of religion may be bridged. There is in fact a plus of conviction in religious faith, with regard to the roots in eternity of spiritual values, which cannot be obtained by the cultivation of a humanist attitude alone. Spiritually minded people will still find congregational life the best means of continuing their own spiritual progress, through self-identification with Jewish experience in the religious interpretation, and by promoting its values in the social grouping of which they are a part. (Guideposts, 201)
This cardinal theme is further developed in “Building Our Future in America.” While continuing to criticize the notion of a Jewish “mission,” Agus here advocates what he calls “the concept of a ‘creative minority,’” by which he means that the American Jewish community should emphasize “autonomy, on creativeness, [which] will cherish and foster whatever cultural and spiritual values are generated by every individual interpretation, every aspiration, within the community” (Guideposts, 213). That is to say:

A “creative minority” is, first, a minority that senses its underlying and essential unity with the general population, even as it is conscious of its own distinguishing attributes. We are not as a lonely island, battered by the endless waves of the encircling ocean, but one of a chain of islands which form a solid continuous range beneath the raging, restless surface. Distinctive as our history and tradition are, they yet constitute a vital part of the realm of ideas and experience upon which American civilization is based. Thus we are part of Christian culture, though apart from it; and, even as we cherish and cultivate our own specific heritage, we must not ignore the massive historical reality, the “Judeo-Christian tradition,” which forms the spiritual substratum of Western civilization.

Secondly, a “creative minority” evolves new values for the general community, of which it is a part, out of the peculiar circumstances which set it apart. While not officiously seeking to lead or teach or preach, it expands the cultural horizons of the whole community by developing the implications of its unique position. In this sense the Jewish community, by faithfully tracing out the inner logic of its traditions and developing the implicit truths of its peculiar status, might unfold fresh insights for the guidance of the entire American nation.

Thirdly, a “creative minority” is value-centered and oriented to the future. Neither exhausted by the elemental struggle for bare survival nor overcome by the great glory of the past, its face is turned toward the sunlight of spiritual growth. It refuses either to chafe vainly against the boundaries that enclose it or to look above them with Olympian detachment as if they did not exist. (Guideposts, 214–15)

The Jewish community will and should remain in America and can flourish here, if it works to maintain and enhance its religio-spiritual identity.

The remaining essays in Guideposts are more directly theological in
nature, beginning with a two-part essay titled “A Reasoned Faith” and subtitled “The Idea of God.” The first half of this essay tries, with considerable success, to establish the conceptual basis for a knowledge of God; the second half deals with God as known through our experience. Here Agus argues for the intuitionist position: “When we are face to face with a striking truth, an act of triumphant goodness or an event of surpassing beauty, we recognize the quality of time-transcending reality, as an immediate, direct experience, and we thrill to it as a fact, not merely a reasoned argument” (Guideposts, 257). The most important theological claim advanced in this essay, however, is that God is to be conceived of in personal rather than impersonal terms:

Shall we think of Him in physical-philosophical terms such as Principle, Power, Absolute, Form or Cause, or shall we employ the personalistic-biblical terms of Father, the Merciful One, the Living God? Manifestly, the only concept which, in our experience constitutes the polar opposite to the concept of mechanical causation. Yet, God is not the Self or Soul of the universe, but, as the Kabbalists correctly pointed out, He is the Soul of the Soul, etc. of the universe. And we have no way of knowing how many links there be found in the spiritual chain of being. (Guideposts, 268)

The second theological paper deals with the absolutely essential and Jewishly unavoidable issue of “Torah Mi-Sinai,” that is, the nature and claims of revelation. Rejecting the rejection of faith while affirming the authenticity of revelation, yet aware of the philosophical problems that the traditional, literalist notion of revelation has engendered in the modern world, Agus attempts to steer a middle ground that argues for the reality of nonpropositional revelation. God speaks to us in our ethical intuition, in our religious feeling (piety), and in moments of inspiration—our ethical intuitions being the most “objective” category (Guideposts, 288)—rather than in the literal legal and historical formulations of the Bible:

Since revelation occurs between man and God, it is obviously unscientific and therefore untruthful to assume that the human or particular element is not felt in the content of revelation. Inevitably, the “Torah speaks the language of men,” in all its finiteness, limitation and particularity. Thus, objectively, God’s speech is not verbal expression; God’s com-
mand is not a specific precept; God's behest is not the fire, clamor and whirlwind of dogmatic rivalries. (Guideposts, 291–92)

What makes Judaism distinctive—what makes Judaism, Judaism—is that it translates this encounter with God into legal categories—"the command of God," (296), the halakah:

Halachah is for us the way in which God's word is progressively being shaped into ways of life. This view is in perfect harmony with our historical knowledge of the evolution of Halachah. The laws of Halachah were not only consciously ordained for the purpose of fostering the "normative" consciousness; they were also in part subconsciously evolved out of the inner religious drive, to translate "feeling" into "law." In this way, the regimen of Halachah made the observant Jew feel that the whole world was encompassed by the sway of Divine Law. (Guideposts, 297)

However, the halakah is, like all products of revelation, an admixture of human and divine elements:

We must make it clear from the objective viewpoint that the revealed character of Jewish legislation refers to the general subconscious spiritual drive which underlies the whole body of Halachah, not to the details of the Law. The vital fluid of the Torah-tree derives from the numinous soil of the Divine, but the actual contours of the branches and the leaves are the product of a variety of climatic and accidental causes. It is of the very essence of the reasoning process to recognize that the particular is accidental and contingent. . . . All that we can and do affirm is the Divine character of the principle of Halachah. From the viewpoint of history, we know that the Shulchan Aruch did not spring fullblown from the mind of Moses. It is the product of gradual evolution, in which diverse social and economic factors were conjoined with those of a purely religious character. (Guideposts, 298–99)

And the outcome of this complex, evolutionary, historical process, according to Agus' criteria, allows for change, modification, and innovation in the halakah—but not for the rejection of the Law itself, that is, a full denial of the category of halakah per se.

Agus then applies this understanding of the halakah in the next three essays, which are devoted, respectively, to (1) "Law in Conservative
Judaism”; (2) “Laws as Standards”; and (3) “Pluralism in Law.” He rightly recognizes the fundamental difference between his understanding of halakah (also that of the Conservative movement) and that of the Orthodox tradition. With honesty he acknowledges, “Manifestly, then, the Conservative movement cannot be described as falling within the limits of ‘Halachah’—true Judaism. On the other hand, it does not reject ‘Halachah’ in the slightest in theory and it does not accept Halachah very largely in practice” (Guideposts, 310–11). Alternatively, he contends that, for the Conservative movement, “the present is more determinative than the past” (312); and therefore the movement must depend on the legitimacy of its own considered takkanot (rabbinical enactments), in order to modernize the halakah as it deems necessary. To aid in this process, Agus supported the creation of a modern Sanhedrin, empowered to make halakic change as necessary:

I would therefore suggest the creation of a Synhedrin-Academy to consist of Jewish scholars and leaders in every field of culture and achievement, chosen from among the world-wide community of Israel. Meeting annually, this convocation of the best representatives of the spirit of Judaism would deal with the moral and spiritual problems of the land of Israel, of the Jewish people, and of humanity. Its discussions and decisions would, of course, not be binding upon the government of Israel, though it would no doubt take up for review and critical appraisal the moral issues involved in the debates and proceedings of the Kenesset.

The discussions of the Synhedrin-Academy, constituting as they would a running commentary upon the varied problems of the Jew in particular and of man in general, would in time perhaps come to form a new Talmud, expressive of the best thought of our time. World Jewry, through its leading representatives, would be given the opportunity to think together, and to unfold the implications of Jewish tradition for the understanding of the crises of our own day and age. (Guideposts, 376–77)


R. Agus’ fourth major publication was Evolution of Jewish Thought (1959). Growing out of a variety of teaching contexts, this study sets out to provide an educated review of the main historical stages of Jewish
thought. It opens with chapters on the Bible and the Rabbinic period—including, interestingly, a chapter on “The Secession of Christianity” (chapter 4)—and then moves through “The Rise of Jewish Rationalism” (chapter 6), “The Decline of Rationalism” (chapter 7), cabala (chapter 9), Hasidism (chapter 10), and “The Age of Reason.” This last chapter analyzes the work of Baruch Spinoza and Moses Mendelssohn and the repercussive intellectual and political issues that arose from the debate over Jewish emancipation after the French Revolution. The specific character and the academic strengths and weaknesses of individual aspects of this long and fascinating history, as retold by Agus, are treated at length in several of the original essays in the companion volume to the present anthology. For my part, I would call attention not only to Agus’ wide erudition and mastery of the entire range of rabbinical philosophical, and cabalistic materials but, more importantly, to his methodological insight:

In this volume, we propose to show that Judaism in nearly every age resembled an Oriental tapestry in the plenitude of colors and shades it embraced and unified. The comparative unity of law and custom concealed the great diversity of thought and sentiment. Within the authentic field of Jewish consciousness we recognize an unending struggle between the self-exaltation of romantic nationalism and the self-dedication of prophetism; between the austere appeal of ruthless rationality and the beguiling seduction of self-flattering sentiments; between the gentle charm of moralistic and pietistic devotions and the popular preference for routinized rites and doubt-proof dogmas. The mighty tensions within the soul of contemporary Western man were reflected faithfully and clearly in the currents and cross-currents of the historic stream of Judaism. (Evolution, 6)

In contradistinction to older, monolithic renderings of the Jewish past, Agus here expresses the most important insight generated by the best modern Jewish scholarship, namely, that Judaism is a “rich spectrum of colors ranging from the twilight moods of mysticism to the stark clarity of rationalism, from the lofty heights of universal idealism to the dark depths of collective ‘sacred egoism’ ” (406).

Yet despite this diversity, this absence of a central authority, this tolerance of various intellectual approaches and understandings, there was an abiding “unity of the Jewish tradition.” This lay
in the text, the context and the emphasis of all schools in Judaism. The unity of a river consists of the bedrock and banks of the channels through which it flows, the intermingling of the tributaries in the course of its flow and the impetus of direction shared by its waters. In Judaism, the unity of source is the chain of sacred literature, the unity of source is the chain of sacred literature, the unity of bedrock is the social structure of Jewish life and the unity of impetus is the quest for the realization of the Godlike qualities of the human personality. The text is the series of sacred documents, the Pentateuch, Bible and Talmud, and all the varied books of the classical tradition. All interpreters of Judaism, as far as their ideas may range, return for inspiration and guidance to the same sacred books. There exists also the unifying code of conduct regulating worship, home ritual and everyday life. (Evolution, 413)

Despite Agus' desire to "modernize" central aspects of classical Judaism, he was too rooted in the rabbinical tradition to fail to understand (and to want that) some residue of vital meaning and authority remain in the canonical texts of the tradition and in the ongoing Jewish community.

However, with regard to the Jewish people, Judaism, and the Jewish community, Agus is quick to add—sensitive to the criticism regularly directed at Jews and Judaism, that they are "narrow-minded" and parochial in their interests and concerns—that Jews and Judaism need be neither of these things. In particular, he reinterprets the doctrine of Israel's chosenness, of the Jews as the "chosen people," in this way:

Is it the intention of this concept that the people ought to be dedicated to the ideals of God, or does it mean that the life of the people is supremely important because the ideals of God are attached to it? The two alternatives do not appear to be mutually exclusive. Yet there is a real choice between the two attitudes in every concrete situation. In the one case the community acts as a "prophet-people," gauging its policies by means of universal, ethical principles and sacrificing its own temporal welfare for the sake of its ideals. In the other case the welfare of the nation itself is ranked as the supreme value and embraced with the wholeheartedness and totality of devotion that is characteristic of genuine piety. In effect the second alternative turns nationalism itself into a zealous religion and all universal ideals are accorded only secondary significance. The posture of a "prophet-people" is still assumed, but the ideals of prophecy are no longer the goal of the nation's existence and
the measuring rod of its actions, only so much guise and disguise.  
(*Evolution*, 419–20)

Ever sensitive to the universal ethical implications of religious dogmas, Agus here once again deciphers the tradition in broad, humanistic, and nonexclusivist terms.

Agus' next major publication was his two-volume *The Meaning of Jewish History* (1963). This can fairly be described as an ideological history of the Jewish people from biblical times to the present. The concern of the narrative is to show the breadth and diversity of Jewish historical experience, its plural spiritual and political forms, while de-mythologizing its essential character. In the course of his exposition, Agus continually throws light on the dialectic between ethnic and universal loyalties in this history, arguing against the ethnic, mystical, romantic, and chauvinistic and for the ecumenical, rational, philosophical, and broadly humane elements within the tradition. The latter values and principles are to be our model and guide into the Jewish future.

Two historical cases discussed at some length are especially notable. The first, "The Jewish-Christian Schism," is of unusual interest because of Agus' long and profound involvement in Jewish-Christian dialogue. According to Agus, the missionizing success of Christianity was the result of two phenomena. One was the specific Christian resolution of the tension within Judaism between the Jewish people and others:

First, the tension between the Jewish people and humanity. It is not true that the Christians were more universalist than the Jews, opening up the boon of salvation to all men, while the Jews sought to keep the Promise all to themselves. But it is true that Christianity was less *nation-centered* than Judaism. The fact is that within Pharisaic Judaism there was a powerful, liberal trend that aimed to disseminate the faith among the nations and that taught "the pious of the nations have a share in the world to come." There was also a tendency to take account of the monotheistic currents of piety, flowing beneath the surface trends of paganism. On the other hand, in the first two centuries, Christian thought was distinctly illiberal, disallowing the belief that God reveals Himself in different ways to different peoples. Did not the Fathers consign the vast majority of mankind to perdition and open the gates of paradise only to those who accepted their dogmas?
Yet the Christian community was far better disposed for the winning of converts than the Jewish people, precisely because it was a church, not a historical-sociological group. The essential difference lay in the fact that the Christian community consisted of individuals, who gained or lost their own title to salvation. Anyone could enter and anyone could leave this “Israel of the spirit.” The promise of salvation and the warning of damnation were directed to the individual. In Judaism, the individual could dissipate or enlarge his heritage, but the faith was still his heritage, as a member of “the people.”

In Christianity, the balance between the individual and the historic community was shattered by the rejection of “the people” as the focus of Divine concern. Any number of individual Jews could enter the Christian community, but “the people” as such was repudiated. (Meaning, 1:167-68)

The other phenomenon was the way in which the Church shattered the tension, inherent in Judaism, between prophecy and priesthood:

The evolution of events was paradoxical. For in the beginning, it was the renewal of the mystical-ecstatic phase of prophecy that served as a substitute for the priestly concern with ritual. To become a Christian was to be baptized by the “Holy Spirit.” (Meaning, 1:168)

The second case concerns the development of the Talmud. As a true talmid chacham, Agus knew his Talmud, and therefore his reflections on its creation, organization, and meaning—in light of his liberal philosophy of halakah—are full of theological interest. He does not disguise the narrow aspects of talmudic teaching—for example, regarding the difference between Israel and the nations—but he is at pains to indicate that the opposite tendencies are to be found in the Talmud as well. And he leaves no doubt as to where his preferences lie:

Within the Talmud, the tension between humanism and ethnicism was continuous and unresolved. It was possible for Talmud-trained people to effect their own resolution of these conflicting trends, some magnifying the one aspect of the tradition and some emphasizing the other aspect. As we have noted previously, the masses of the people probably inclined toward the pole of ethnic pride and prejudice, while the saintly few thought in universal and humanistic terms. (Meaning, 1:222)
In the second volume of *The Meaning of Jewish History*, Agus takes his narrative forward into the medieval and modern eras. Of the two chapters on the medieval period, the first is a rather long essay on what might be called Jewish social history. It intelligently, and with considerable historical learning, seeks to explore the perplexing issue of Jewish survival in this hostile epoch. Agus rightly stresses that Jews were subjects, as well as objects, who took responsibility for their circumstances and acted to defend their interests and assure their collective survival. And Agus pays special attention to the role of messianism in this historical context (*Meaning*, 2:269–80). The second essay deals critically with what Agus calls “The Triumph of Subjectivism: Qabbalah.” Agus is fundamentally unsympathetic to this tradition of esoteric speculation, which he describes in this way:

While philosophy seeks to explain life in terms of the categories of *spirit*—logic, ethics, and esthetic harmony—Qabbalah aims to take account of man’s existence, especially the destiny of the Jew, in terms of the categories of *life*—the rhythms of the Divine Being and the various emanations deriving from it. To the philosopher, all human history is ultimately reducible to mechanical forces and mathematical formulae. To the Qabbalist, all explanations are ultimately the narration of a series of events in the *Divine Pleroma* (the Emanations and Sefiroth), which stands between God and man. Yet Qabbalah is not altogether a reversion to pagan mythology, since the impetus of monotheism is still contained within it. The Qabbalist strains with all the powers of personality toward the dark, comforting shadows of insulated piety, but there is a desperate tension in his soul for he has been driven from the paradise of naivete by the subtle serpent of speculation.

It is important to take a good look at the bizarre pattern of Qabbalistic speculations, for Qabbalah was not merely a temporary aberration of Medieval Jews. As a matter of fact, Qabbalah captured the Jewish mind at the end of the fifteenth century, at the very time when the diverse movements of Renaissance, Reformation, and Counter-Reformation were struggling for supremacy. Steadily through the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, it dominated the minds of Jewish thinkers. (*Meaning*, 2:287–88)

Agus attributes the power and attraction of cabalistic thought to the oppressive situation in which Jews found themselves in the late medieval
and early modern eras. Amid the brutality and persecution, cabala provided a "pious fantasy" that consoled the Jewish people while they waited "supinely for the Messiah" (2:289). Agus’ understanding of cabala is not flattering, and there is more to be said about the nature of cabalistic teachings than Agus says, but he is certainly correct in his historical judgment that

Qabbalah . . . aided the Jew in his struggle for survival under adverse conditions, but it also separated him from any intellectual-ethical communion with the emerging society of mankind. It provided an exciting mythology, elevating every Jewish custom and every nuance of the liturgy to the rank of a world-saving enterprise. At the same time, the speculative notions and the debris of ancient philosophical systems contained within its volumes offered substitute satisfactions to the insistent quest of the intellectuals. But these services of Qabbalah were purchased at the high price of deepening the isolation of the Jew. The ritual barriers were raised higher. Even more important, the division between Jew and Gentile was now universally assumed to be one of metaphysical substance and origin. It was no longer a matter of belief that separated the Jew from "the nations," but the fact that the Jewish souls were derived from the Divine Being, while the souls of the nations were sparks from the satanic Pleroma of shells, the so called "other side" (Sitra Ahra). On this basis, there could not possibly be any kind of intellectual contact between Jews and Gentiles. (Meaning, 2:295)

In his treatment of the modern period, Agus begins by tracing the influence of cabala in Sabbatianism (seventeenth century) and Hasidism (eighteenth century). He then turns to the process of emancipation in Western Europe and retells the familiar tale of Spinoza; Mendelssohn; the Haskalah; the "Jewish Question" before, during, and after the French Revolution; early Zionism; bundism; Napoleon; romanticism; Reform Judaism; Dubnow’s "autonomism"; and the rise of modern anti-Semitism. Agus has read widely on all these matters, makes sober judgments (whether or not one agrees with all of them), and is, in general, a reliable guide to this complex historical development. What make the exercise interesting are Agus "opinionated" views on nearly every subject reviewed. He knows who the "good guys" and the "bad guys" are—and he has thought through the merits of the various ideological positions reported on.
In the “Epilogue,” Agus discusses the rebirth of the State of Israel and the state of Jewish life in America. One must remark that the thirty-odd years since the publication of the *The Meaning of Jewish History* have shown Agus to be about half right in his view for the future of Arab-Israeli relations and of American Jewry—half right on the former because, while his insistence that peace was achievable has been proven true in the peace with Egypt, Jordan, and the accord with the Palestine Liberation Organization, his idealism that caused him to counsel:

At this writing, we cannot foretell the course of Israel’s development, nor can we outline a specific policy for immediate implementation. But this can be said with certainty, the moral health and the very life of Israel depend upon its finding ways to win over the Arabs. The task is not one of concluding pacts with the neighboring governments, but of achieving true bonds of fraternity with the Arab people. To this end, the Arabs within Israel’s borders and those encamped on its periphery must be converted into a bridge of friendship between the two ancient peoples. By working for them and with them, smoldering hates can be transmuted into a new blaze of amity and unity. (*Meaning*, 2:466)

still seems out of touch with the harsh mass situation on the ground.

Likewise, Agus’ optimism vis-à-vis America was largely correct. The United States has proven to be a “golden land” of unlimited opportunities for Jews, especially in the last thirty years. Yet the corresponding erosion in commitment to the identity and precepts of Judaism—indicated most clearly by the rate of intermarriage—within the American Jewish community is unprecedented and threatens the very shape and enduring vitality of the community.

In 1966, Agus published his mature views on Jewish ethics in *The Vision and the Way*. Polarity again dominates his thought. Ethics is born of two sources, the intellect and feeling. Jewish ethics is notable, commendable, by virtue of the fact that it manages to hold these two “pillars” in creative tension. In consequence, the transrational vision which asserts that God is the source of all goodness and beyond human judgment is balanced by “the Way of ‘justice and righteousness,’” that is, a rational, universal ethic which requires that ethical norms be subject to human investigation and judgment: “To believe in God, Who is beyond Nature and *unlike* all things, and, at the same time, to insist that the moral-rational Way, as it is manifest in the light of reason, is a
revelation of His Will—this dual conviction establishes the central polarity in biblical religion” (*Vision and Way*, 33).

Agus traces this fruitful polarity through the main ethical categories of Jewish thought and life. He draws a rich picture of Jewish ethics from the talmudic texts that provide an image of an “Ideal Society”—with its concern for social justice, the poor, and the oppressed; its “massive philanthropic enterprises” (*Vision and Way*, 63); and its hope for messianic perfection, brought on by human deeds, at which time evil will be finally eradicated and the good vindicated—and an “Ideal Personality” (chapter 4) in which the moral “hero is the incarnation of the ideal(s)” (73), an heir of the prophets, a person who blends priestliness and the virtues of the “Disciple of the Wise” (78):

Unlike the saint, he never forgets the claims of humanity—of family, of work, of innocent delights. He is aware of the “Evil Desire” and of the many ways in which it corrupts man’s best intentions, but like the philosopher, he reveres the regenerative and intellectual qualities of human nature. (*Vision and Way*, 79)

In addition, Agus decipheres “The Virtue of Obedience,” “The Infinite Dimension of Purity,” “The Ethics of Self-Realization,” and “Freedom and Determinism.” For each topic, he presents the tradition in its variety, its strengths and limits. In sum, the book is, through his extensive quotation of primary materials, mainly an anthology of rabbinical doctrines on the good life, compiled by a master anthologizer.

In regard to the contemporary situation in comparative historical perspective, Agus makes the important observation that looking at the total spectrum of Jewish ethics, one sees that the popular notion, that the Law governs every question in Judaism, is a fallacy. As has been pointed out, there were indeed times when nearly all creative principles were locked into the rigid categories of an all-embracing law that was presumed to be God-given. But *pan-halachism* is more characteristic of extremist Orthodoxy in the modern period than of the pre-modern tradition. In the Talmud the cast-iron logic of legalism was balanced by several factors—the projection of an ethical domain “beyond the law” (*lifnim mishurat hadin*), the recognition of the validity of the mores and morals of civilized humanity (*derech eretz*), and by the mystical or philosophical notions that were cultivated in esoteric circles.
As late as the sixteenth century, when the Shulhan Aruch was codified, the realm of Perfection beyond the Law was cultivated in pietistic and mystical literature. (Vision and Way, 321)

He goes on to argue:

An analysis of the inner dynamics of Jewish ethics does not reveal a monolithic philosophy of life. It is possible to resolve the tension between the Vision and the Way by choosing any one of many positions within the ethical-religious polarity. Tolerance of differences is a marked characteristic of rabbinic discussions—“these and these are the words of the Living God.” A broad consensus on any one issue may emerge at any one time, but we can hardly dignify any one synthesis as being the Jewish, or the “normative” one. (Vision and Way, 324)

Once again, Agus calls for a rational, nonracial, non-“in-group” ethic. Such an inclusive ethic includes a concern for the world order, the search for international justice, disarmament, the end of nuclear weapons, and support for the United Nations so as to mitigate conflict and prevent new crimes against humanity.

Tradition and Dialogue, published in 1971, continued Agus’ reflections on a variety of contemporary issues. Here the essays concern the Jewish-Christian dialogue; Agus’ ongoing dialogue with Arnold Toynbee over the continuing vitality of Judaism (for Toynbee’s change of opinion regarding Judaism, due to Agus’ influence, see volume 12 of Toynbee’s A Study of History: Reconsiderations, which includes two essays by Agus published as an appendix); his response to the “God is Dead” movement, in two sympathetic but critical essays collected under the heading “Dialogue with the New Atheists”; a variety of issues identified as “Dialogue with Secular Ideologies”; and last, ten essays on internal Jewish matters ranging from “The Prophet in Modern Hebrew Literature” to “The Concept of Israel” and “Assimilation, Integration, Segregation: The Road to the Future.”

What strikes one in reading these diverse pieces is the breadth of Agus’ Jewish learning. Not only are biblical, talmudic, medieval, and modern sources critically evaluated, but Hebrew poets such as Hayim Nahum Bialik and the modern Hebrew authors Saul Tchernichovsky, J. H. Brenner, and Uri Zvi Greenberg are engaged in a serious and informed way.
In 1978, Agus published his next to last book, *Jewish Identity in an Age of Ideologies*. This is a sustained effort both to situate the Jew and Judaism vis-à-vis the most important European ideologies of the past two hundred years and to view these ideologies from a Jewish perspective. He begins with Mendelssohn and the issue of Jewish-Christian relations in the age of Enlightenment. He then reviews Immanuel Kant’s hostility toward Judaism and the efforts by Jewish Kantians such as Moritz Lazarus, Hermann Cohen, and Leo Baeck to bring about some rapprochement between Kantianism and Judaism. He considers the attitude of the German romantics toward religion, Judaism, and religious reform, including a critique of Jewish “romantics,” that is, those who deprecate the role of reason in the religious life, such as Samuel David Luzzatto (1800–1865) and, in Agus’ controversial view, Samson Raphael Hirsch (1808–1888). In chapter 4, titled “Are the Jews ‘Ahistorical’?” Agus takes up a critical dialogue with G.W.F. Hegel’s historicism and three Jewish responses thereto by, respectively, Samuel Hirsch (1815–1889), Solomon Formstecher (1808–1889), and Nahman Krochmal (1785–1840). Hirsch and Formstecher tried to meet Hegel’s criticism of Judaism by calling for the internal reform of Judaism. Krochmal, a far deeper thinker, tried to respond to Hegel by denying the applicability of the Hegelian system to Judaism; that is, he argued, in contradistinction to Hegel’s systemic claims, that Judaism is not subject to the normal laws of national development and decay that govern other nations. Other schools and movements dealt with by Agus are nationalism; socialism in its various forms, namely, bundism and Marxism; Zionism; racism in its myriad forms; Bergsonian vitalism; Jewish existentialism (Buber and Rosenzweig); biblical criticism; Barthianism (Karl Barth [1886–1968]); and Toynbeeism (Arnold Toynbee). In every instance Agus is a serious and respectful critic; in every dialogue he makes the case for a liberal, humanistic, nonromantic Judaism, shorn of the meta-myth of Jewish being. Though one can differ with Agus’ various judgments, one can never ignore or dismiss them. In the end, he has accomplished what he set out to achieve in this work: to view Judaism from both within and without as it struggles with modernity.

Agus’ last work, a collection of theological essays, was published in 1983 under the title *The Jewish Quest*. “The Jewish Quest,” he tells us, “is to make oneself and the world fit for the indwelling of the Divine Presence; theologically speaking, it is a yearning for the ‘kingdom of heaven’” (vii). Here familiar themes are taken up, clarified, and deep-
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ened: America and the Jewish people, Jewish self-definition, classicism and romanticism, the meta-myth, Zionism, holism, nonliteral revelation, Jewish ethics, Judaism and the world community, Maimonides' philosophical rationalism, the defense of Conservative Judaism, the foundations for a modern revision of the halakah anti-Semitism, and various aspects of the Jewish-Christian dialogue. To the end Agus was sober, cautious, yet hopeful; opposed to fanaticism of all sorts; an enemy of Jewish "self-mythification," of "biblical claims of singularity and uniqueness," of "the seductive fantasies of self-glorification" (Jewish Quest, 10); suspicious of messianic and self-serving metaphysical claims; and intensely committed to a demanding ethical vision that united all peoples.

Agus' philosophical and theological corpus can, in summation, be seen as extensive, consequential, and provocative. Perhaps best characterized as a neo-Maimonidean, Agus belongs to the long chain of Jewish rationalists that includes Philo, Saadya, Maimonides, and Mendelssohn, and which has been more recently represented so brilliantly by Hermann Cohen. Like Cohen, of whom he wrote admiringly, Agus held firm to the conviction that Judaism was explicable and defensible in universal rational and ethical terms. Possessing their own deep spiritual integrity, the classical sources of Judaism embodied a profoundly humane moral vision that was both philosophically compelling and metaphysically attractive. Those who, out of religious frustration or a failure of philosophical nerve, seek to turn away from rational analysis and criteria in their deconstruction of Judaism and its God do a serious disservice to the intellectual and spiritual tradition they seek to excavate and defend. Here is the ground of Agus' sharp disagreement with Buber's dialogical philosophy and his reservations about the work of Abraham Joshua Heschel and other contemporary religious existentialists. Agus admired their religious intentions but faulted their method and logic.

Agus was not a stranger to religious feelings or deep traditional religious commitments; but he held that these necessary aspects of the religious life must be regulated by constraints that only reason could supply. Thus, for example, though a longtime colleague of Mordecai Kaplan, he was critical of Kaplan's reconstructionist views, not only because they lacked grounding in the traditional halakic and intellectual sources of Judaism but also because Kaplan's systematic revision of Judaism along functionalist anthropological and sociological lines was
spiritually impoverished and impoverishing. God, for Agus, had to be more than “the power that makes for salvation”; Jewish behavior had to be more than sociologically defined “sancta,” and the obligations of Torah and halakah more than pragmatic initiatives and psychological panaceas. Indeed, it was this tension, this firmly held belief in the necessity of holding onto a more traditional spirituality, that led Agus to admire the genuine mystical personality of Rav Kook, even though he was profoundly critical of the cabalistic Weltanschauung that defined Kook’s entire thought world. Kook’s spirituality, his sense of the presence of the Living God, attracted Agus—not least because he shared the same openness to the numinous.

Agus’ rationalism also separated him from all forms of romanticism, the most important modern Jewish manifestations of this inclination being found in certain versions of Zionism. While he defined himself as a supporter and defender of the Jewish right to a national state, Agus’ outspoken criticism of aspects of American Zionism—that is, nationalism as a substitute for authentic religious commitment—made him many enemies. In arguing for this position, he manifested an attitude close to the intellectual-spiritual stance that had been struck by Franz Rosenzweig, though Rosenzweig was writing in the 1920s, before the Shoah and the creation of the modern State of Israel. Like Rosenzweig, and unlike Buber, Agus was suspicious of all forms of nationalism, including Jewish nationalism. I believe his stance vis-à-vis the State of Israel was too critical and that he was too optimistic with regard to both the future of Jewish life in the diaspora, especially in America, and Israeli-Arab relations, but he was certainly right to warn of the pseudomessianic temptations that the creation of a renewed Jewish state, and especially Jewish victory in 1967, has spawned. The State of Israel need not be the messianic state for it to be Jewishly necessary, legitimate, and worthy of our unwavering, though not uncritical, support.

If Agus had serious reservations about the systematic work of other nineteenth- or twentieth-century Jewish thinkers and movements, he shared, in a broad sense, their call for halakic revision. This he did on ethical and rational grounds—and here especially he becomes a “modern” thinker among the pantheon of modern thinkers, stretching from the early reformers to certain contemporary feminists. However, even in this area of fundamental concern, his approach was distinctive. As a true talmid chacham, he demanded that the halakic changes he supported
be undertaken in a way consistent with the spirit of the halakic process as he understood it. In consequence, he was considered too conservative and traditional for many of his Conservative rabbinical (and other) contemporaries, while for the Orthodox (and certain members of the Jewish Theological Seminary hierarchy) he was too radical.

Agus was also distinctively modern in his openness to interreligious dialogue. Almost all major Jewish thinkers of the twentieth century—for example, Baeck, Rosenzweig, Buber, and Heschel—have significantly involved themselves in reevaluating the relationship of Judaism and Christianity. Jacob Agus did likewise. Given his universal ethical norms and broad humanistic concerns, this is in no way surprising. Agus assumed that all people shared certain basic values, which were then individually expressed in the world’s differing religious traditions. It was this dialectic between the universal and the particular that lay at the base of his deep, personal engagement in this area and that energized his theological conversation with such dialogue partners as Arnold Toynbee, Cardinal Bea, and Baltimore’s Catholic hierarchy. Then too, like many Jewish thinkers before him—Philo, Maimonides, Mendelssohn, Cohen, and Rosenzweig—his participation in ecumenical dialogue was not free of apologetic concerns; that is, he sought to defend Judaism against its detractors and to share its spiritual and intellectual resources with others on the assumption that non-Jews could benefit from its distinctive wisdom.

Taken altogether, Agus pursued his own unique, quite American modernizing vision, which ardently sought to remain in touch with the wellsprings of the rabbinical tradition while being open to the intellectual and moral currents of his own time.

CONCLUSION

The selections from R. Agus’ writings in this volume and the selectors’ original essays in the new companion volume titled American Rabbi: The Life and Thought of Jacob B. Agus (New York, 1996) consider the main aspects of Agus’ life and work in more detail. They flesh out the broad and repercussive themes adumbrated in a schematic way in this Introduction. And taken as a whole, they present a broad and substantial picture of a remarkable American rabbi and scholar. One does not have to agree with all of Agus’ views—I, for one, disagree with aspects of his writings on Zionism, nonpropositional revelation, the Torah, the
vitality and future of Conservative Judaism, and the basis for revising (or not revising) the halakah in our time—but one has to admire his commitment to the Jewish people everywhere, his profound and unwavering spirituality, his continual reminders of the very real dangers of pseudomessianism and misplaced romantic zeal, his devotion to "Talmud Torah" in all of its guises, his personal piety, his willingness to take politically and religiously unpopular stands, his defense of such men as Owen Lattimore and Arnold Toynbee, his consistent faith in reason, his erudition in Western philosophy, and his tenacious ethical humanism, which knew no ethnic or racial boundaries. In sum, much of the best of Jewish and Western tradition was incarnated in a yeshiva bocher from Sislevitch. May his memory be for a blessing.

NOTES