The Essential Agus

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THE EMANCIPATION of the Jews of western Europe, proceeding apace from the first decade of the nineteenth century, brought the individual Jew to the fore, liberating him from the pressure of enforced communal loyalties. In the course of time the bonds of communal loyalty were weakened; the congregation, a voluntary association of free individuals, came to take the place of the overall community which one entered by birth and left by death or an act of conversion. As a result all the cleavages in Jewish life were widened and deepened.

In the nineteenth century the meaning of the term “Jewish thought” became both wider and narrower than in all previous centuries. It was now wider since the resonant voices outside the pale of the community would not be ignored. Is it justifiable to leave out of our discussion, for example, such men as Heine, Börne and Bergson, whose inspiration derived at least in part from Jewish sources as well as from Jewish experience?

On the other hand, “Jewish thought” came to embrace a necessarily narrower compass than in the past, for the Jew as man is now part of the European community, and the Jew qua Jew is such only by virtue of his theology and his “misfortune,” the burden of anti-Semitism.

Each of the currents comprising the variegated stream of Jewish thought is intensified and deepened by the massive challenge of modernists. Rationalistic Judaism has eventuated in the modern movements of Reform and Conservatism, with the latter group adding a strong
dose of nationalist romanticism and a dash of mysticism to its rationalistic approach. Orthodox Judaism in the eastern countries has become more isolationist than in previous centuries, barricading itself against the incursion of secular learning and the solvent effects of the rationalistic spirit. In eastern Europe the dark cobwebs of Qabbalistic mysticism remained undisturbed well into the twentieth century, while in western Europe Orthodoxy embraced an uneasy alliance with modern culture, seeking support from the anti-intellectualist trends of modern thought and continuing the traditional current of romanticism, in both its ethnic and affective forms.

But the divergent trends do not separate into independent denominations or even independent schools of thought; they continue to affect, influence and mold one another. We encounter in Judaism the phenomenon which sociologists call the “cultural lag”—namely, the fact that only the upper layer of any society changes culturally with the times, while the medium layer changes more slowly and a large portion of society continues its slumber virtually undisturbed. Accordingly, no matter how far the advanced elements of Jewry developed in their quest for a new synthesis of Judaism and the modern spirit, a remnant of the old mentality persisted in every generation. Consequently, in Orthodox ranks today all shades of the premodern spectrum of beliefs can still be found, and individual thinkers, beginning their intellectual adventure in the Orthodox community, are compelled to find their own way to a tenable philosophy of life out of the darkly shadowed, tortuous paths of medievalism.

Secularism is distinctly a new phenomenon in “Jewish thought.” Created in the first place by the impact of rationalism, it assumed a Jewish garb under the influence of ethnic romanticism. While the secularists in the first half of the nineteenth century generally accepted the “entrance ticket to European culture,” converting to Christianity, those of the latter half of the past century remained as a rule officially within the Jewish community. In the last decades of the century they provided the leadership and impetus of the Zionist movement.

Nothing demonstrates the complex interaction of opposing intellectual forces in Jewish life so much as the emergence of Zionism. In the first place, it was made possible by the influence of rationalism, which undermined the old faith in the eventual coming of the Messiah. On the other hand, its reassertion of Jewish ethnicism drew inspiration and vitality from the romantic current in Judaism, which described the
people of Israel as a uniquely endowed nation, set apart by divine decree or by the fatalities of history from all the families of the earth. At the same time, the mystical trend in Orthodox Judaism rediscovered in Zionism a quasi-magical device for hastening the steps of the Messiah. While rationalistic Zionists sought to build a homeland for the Jew as a means of overcoming the Jewish “abnormality” of status in the lands of the Diaspora, and of encouraging the “normal” processes of assimilation in the Diaspora, romantic Zionists sought to employ a Jewish homeland as a means of preserving the “abnormal” status of a “unique” people, countering the trends of assimilation. As this is written, this issue is still unresolved.

Now that the State of Israel is a reality, the exponents of rationalistic Judaism look upon it as a creative center of Jewish faith and culture, not as a means of liquidating the Jewish communities in the Diaspora. Accordingly, they encourage the moral stature of the state rather than its military might, just as they favor the promotion of the spiritual values of Judaism in every country where Jews are found. And they see no good purpose served in the world-wide effort to encourage emigration to Israel, undercutting the psychological rootedness of the Jewish Diaspora so as to bring about its degeneration and disappearance. On the other hand, those who draw their inspiration from the romantic current of Judaism see the Jew as “unique” and “different,” forever arrayed against the “nations,” with no hope of peace for him, except in his own land, where the strength of his arms will protect him from his enemies. Thus do the issues of today reflect the impetus of the divergent currents of yesterday.

As we turn back for a synoptic view of the different currents within the stream of Judaism we note first the fallacy of all monolithic renderings of this tradition. Friends and foes loved to write of Judaism as if it had a single view of life, providing one answer to all-important questions. Not only psychopathic anti-Semites, painting Judaism in the darkest hues, but even philosophical interpreters of culture, too, construed the Jew as one psychological type and Judaism as a monochromatic picture on the unfolding scroll of human history. Hence, the potent fantasies concerning the characteristics of the “Semitic mind.”

Renan saw the Jewish spirit as one of surpassing but monotonous brightness, like the glare of sunlight in the desert, oblivious of the variety of shade and color in nature, seeing the upper surface of things
with harsh clarity, but ignoring the reality of depths and shadows. A whole school of historians goes back to Fichte and Schleiermacher for inspiration. In their view, the Jewish faith is the reflection of the peculiarity of Jewish genius, which consists of a calculating cleverness and business shrewdness; incapable of profundity, inventiveness or the appreciation of the romantic nature of man. Wellhausen conceived the difference between prophecy and mysticism in terms of this concept. Mysticism is an expression of the piety of the Aryan soul, in which man surrenders all of himself in the fullness of love. The Semite, according to this school, is capable only of receiving and taking, not of loving and giving. Accordingly, the Bible envisions the prophet as filling himself up with the divine spirit.

Even in socialist circles this mischievous conception of a peculiar Jewish mind was given fresh currency and the semblance of authority by Karl Marx, who maintained that the god of the Jew was the dollar bill and his worship a form of bargaining and haggling.

To counter this nonsense, many Jewish writers set up opposing fantasies of their own, extolling the Jewish "genius" and soothing the wounded vanity of their people. For example, Abraham Geiger, with all his liberalism and sober rationality, wrote of the existence of a Jewish "genius" for religion, shared by no other people; Samuel David Luzzatto asserted that pity was the unique quality of the Jewish soul; and Ahad Haam maintained that the rational quest for the dominion of absolute justice was the underlying impetus of the Jewish mind.

Need poison be countered by anti-poison drugs, or can mankind be educated to dispense with the drug of collective egotism and learn to take life as it is, without the sinister solace of artificial concoctions? After all, counterpoisons are also drugs. We believe that the best defense against the barbs of bigotry is the serenity of objective thought, not the fevered passion of superheated ethnic zealotry.

We have seen a wide variety of theological positions in the long and winding pathways of Jewish thought. How broad is the panorama thus unfolded! How rich is the spectrum of colors ranging from the twilight moods of mysticism to the stark clarity of rationalism, from the lofty heights of universalist idealism to the dark depths of collective "sacred egoism"!

We find exponents of both alternatives in the discussion of such central issues as the following:
(1) THE TRANSCENDENCE OF GOD VERSUS HIS IMMANENCE

Rationalists like Maimonides asserted that God was remote from earthly concerns and far beyond the grasp of human faculties. His Providence does not extend to the masses of people, “the poor and the broken in spirit,” but only to the well-proportioned and well-disposed, those reflective and saintly souls whose lines have fallen in pleasant places, and who undertake the arduous philosophical disciplines leading to the comprehension of His difference from the material world. All Biblical miracles were predetermined in advance of creation, built into the inflexible system of iron necessity that governs the universe. The only pathway to God is that of reason, and this pathway is impersonal, consisting in the elimination from our mind of human interests and the actual stuff of experience.

On the other hand, the doctrine of divine immanence is well represented in the stream of Jewish thought. In the ethnic romanticism of Halevi, God is portrayed as being in direct communication with the people of Israel, when they are gathered in the land of Israel. A divine effulgence was visible, at least to the sages and to the prophets, and a divine voice could be heard at critical moments. In Qabbalah, man’s power to affect the divine pattern of sefirot was deemed to be so direct and immediate as to be virtually automatic, the Deity acting toward man, “like a shadow.” The material world was only the lowest garment of the substance of reality. And man’s soul is not entirely enclosed in his body, being rooted in the realm of sefirot.

In naïve or unreflective Judaism, both concepts of the Deity could be found side by side. Consequently, the Talmud and a huge mass of popular pietistic literature employ rationalistic and mystical concepts, almost interchangeably, for their “religious value,” if we may coin a new phrase, without any awareness of their mutual incompatibility.

(2) HUMAN DIGNITY VERSUS HUMAN SINFULNESS

Does a person best reflect the “image of God” within him when he is made aware of his dignity or of his sinfulness? This question points to a psychological cleavage that cuts deep. On the one hand, there is the “active” piety of those who consider man to be “a partner of the Lord” in the establishment of His kingdom on earth. God is best served by the
fullest assertion of man’s faculties and gifts. Man is bidden to use his faculty of rational judgment, in the determination of right and wrong, and in the amelioration of existing evils. When men assert their perceptive powers in the domains of thought and action, they give concrete expression to the divine element in their nature. For man and God are united in rationality, love of goodness and gentleness, and in reverence for law. In general man is the agent of the divine nisus for perfection.

This way of thinking is reflected not only in the rationalistic school but also in the sober mood of the Talmudic sages. The concept of a covenant between man and God in which both parties to the agreement undertake to abide by certain actions is a perfect expression of “active” piety. God does not compel man to accept any law, but man does what is right out of loyalty to his own higher nature, which is Godlike. And this concept underlies the reasoning of Halachah, Jewish law. If the children of Israel had not voluntarily undertaken to observe the law, they would not have been obliged to abide by it, for in the domain of reason and ethics all rational and moral beings are equal.

But while the mood of “active piety” is well represented in Judaism, the opposite mood of total surrender to the divine will is also rather frequently encountered. This attitude is permeated with a deep awareness of human failure. Man’s greatest achievements are but vanity and naught. It is in sin that we are born. “And if thou dost act rightly, what does thou give unto Him?”

“What are we, what is our life, what our kindness, our righteousness, our salvation, our power, our heroism? And the superiority of man over the beast is naught, for all is vanity.”

In this mood we feel that God’s only demand is man’s self-abasement. Not by being “like unto God,” but by total surrender, by “a broken heart,” by the practice of humility so thoroughgoing as to approach self-negation, does God take delight in us. By active striving we achieve nothing, for God neither desires our good right arm nor can we exert any of our faculties to good effect without falling victim to the perverting and ensnaring forces of pride and sin.

Several historians of religion take the contrast between the active and the passive moods of piety to be the fundamental distinction between Judaism and Christianity. But actually many variations of passive piety are found not only in the romantic and mystical currents of Jewish thought, but also in the pietistic literature (Mussar) of popular Judaism.

The opposition of several leading Orthodox rabbis to the introduc-
tion of an organ in the synagogue was motivated by the belief that beauty and dignity minister to man's sense of self-importance, discouraging the penitential mood of sinfulness. "A sinner must not bedeck himself with beauty, a sinner must not take on the garments of pride."  

As a rule, the doctrine of "original sin" is not central in Judaism, but at various times it has been strongly affirmed. In the Talmud we find the dogmatic assertion that all who did not stand at Sinai suffer from the "corruption of the serpent." In Qabbalah the souls of all non-Jews are presumed to be "rooted" in the domain of the "shells."  

In Halevi's philosophy, even converts cannot expect to achieve equality with born Jews following the advent of the Messiah nor to become recipients of the "gift of prophecy." The capacity for the "divine quality" is denied by Halevi to non-Jewish mankind as a whole, which is doomed to grope in the darkness. Also, the proposition that it is possible for man, unaided by revelation, to live a life of goodness and attain a share in the world to come is both affirmed and denied in Jewish tradition.  

(3) IS THE CONTENT OF RELIGION SOME THINGS TO BE DONE OR SOMETHING TO BECOME?

This question probes deep into the nature of piety. When religion consists of a number of rites to perform and commandments to execute, we have a pattern of piety that is external to man's true being. It may be dogmatically asserted that the rites in question exert a quasi-magical effect on the soul and in the cosmos, "purifying" man's inner nature and providing "food for the upper worlds." But in the actual performance of the rites there is no inherent sequence of effects upon the psyche of the worshiper. In this pattern of piety the supreme value of the ritual is asserted, and the value of any universal ethical and esthetic virtues is questioned.

Such a completely externalized religion may be softened by the additional requirement of "duties of the heart," supplementing those of physical performance. But, characteristically, these obligations of the mind and heart are not conceived of as mandatory and essential to the rite itself.

This nonspiritual concept of piety is certainly encountered within the sacred literature of the Jewish faith. It is virtually assumed in the stream of Halachic (legalistic) nonphilosophic Judaism. It is justified
somewhat hesitantly in the romantic current of Jewish thought. In Qabbalah we find elaborate rationalizations for the belief in the cosmic effects of the performance of the *mizvot*.

But the opposing concept of the nature of piety is also well represented in Judaism. In the rationalistic school, the *mizvot* are conceived of as instruments of piety embodying universal, ethical and esthetic values. The *mizvot* were intended to train men and women in the acquisition of good habits, noble ideas and lofty sentiments. The context of religion is not the execution of certain commands, but the fulfillment of the divine potential in human nature. God is not a king, intent upon the enforcement of His orders, but our Father, concerned with helping us to attain the fullness of our stature. Religion is not a burden on our backs, but an aspiration in our souls to grow into our ideal likeness. Understood in this way, the virtue and truth of other religions may be honestly acknowledged without giving up the belief in one’s own religion. Faith becomes not the guardianship of “eternal verities,” but the quest for the truths of eternity, a search for wider horizons for the life of the soul, a courageous ascent and an endless task.

(4) IS MAN COMPLETELY FREE TO WORK OUT HIS OWN SALVATION, OR IS HIS FUTURE PREDETERMINED?

The predominant emphasis in Judaism is unquestionably on the side of man’s freedom. The Torah affirms that man is free to choose between good and evil, the blessing and the curse, life and death. In the Talmud, we are told that everything in a person’s life is fixed in advance save his righteousness. “All is in the power of heaven, save the fear of heaven.”

Rabbi Akiba set the stage for a philosophical riddle that occupied all the masters of Jewish philosophy when he asserted, “All is foreseen, but the choice is given.” The power of repentance is infinite in scope; even the greatest sinners can, if they will, transform their lives and attain the greatest heights of piety.

On the other hand, Crescas, who has been called “the most Jewish of all the philosophers,” declares that even a person’s piety is predetermined and human freedom is only an illusion. In Qabbalah, non-Jewish humanity, drawing its sustenance from the “shells,” can hardly be expected to do anything that is genuinely good. Those who become converts to Judaism, so the legend goes, possess souls which were
present at Sinai when the covenant was concluded. A verse from Proverbs (14:34) is an oft-quoted maxim: “Even the kindness of the nations is sinful.”

The advent of the Messiah, who will usher in the Kingdom of God, is both fixed in the mind of God and also dependent on Jewish repentance. If Jewish merit and penitence do not succeed in hastening the arrival of the Messiah, then he will come in the previously appointed time.8

In the rationalistic current of Jewish thought, it is assumed that man’s reason is free and untrammeled and that man can attain the good life by the exercise of his native endowments of intelligence and conscience. Both assumptions are contested in the romantic and mystical schools of Jewish thought. Reason is declared to be the shameless servant of the will, and the will in turn is “rooted” by birth and early upbringing either in the spheres of holiness among loyal Jews or in the unclean dominion of the “other side,” among the rest of mankind. Halevi introduces the argument in his famous book by telling of an angel that appeared to King Bulan and warned him, “Thy thoughts are acceptable but thy deeds are not.” Acceptable deeds, for Halevi, are spelled out in the codes of the Jewish faith. Non-Jewish humanity is for the ethnic romantics, by and large, precluded from salvation.

For the rationalists, divine grace is not needed as the condition for man’s goodness, since this favor is granted to man at birth and by education in the shape of the twin lights in his soul, conscience and intelligence. For the romantics and mystics, divine grace and the “merit of the fathers” is of the essence. For man’s soul is virtually besieged by the malicious forces of Satan. And those which are not “rooted” in the divine pleroma are almost inevitably steeped in sin.

(5) IS THE DIVINE WILL INHERENT IN THE NORMAL AND NATURAL PROCESSES OF HISTORY, OR IS IT “TRANSHISTORICAL,” BREAKING INTO THE FLUX OF HISTORICAL EVENTS WITH PREDETERMINED RESULTS?

This question seems labored and casuistic; yet, it points to the real issue between those who believe that human progress is a gradual result of the strains and stresses of social forces and those who envision the high points of peace and prosperity as being attained by unpredictable
incursions of God’s grace. When the question is asked, “Does Judaism believe in human progress?” the answer cannot be given in the simple syllables of “yes” or “no.”

The vision of the Messianic era was born in Judaism, a many-splendored vision of hope and beauty incarnate. But this vision represented not the upward path but the ultimate goal, the situation at “the end of days.” Nor did that vision stand alone, unassociated with other eschatological hopes and fantasies. After a period lasting from forty years to four hundred years, according to different traditions, it was believed that the human personality would become metamorphosed and life in all its aspects would be completely transformed, ushering in the wondrous era of “the world to come.” Perfection in body and soul would then be the unfailing rule—but the human body would then be transformed into a new, heavenly substance, no longer a thing of flesh and blood.

Is the goal reached through the processes of history? A rationalist like Maimonides believed that the Messianic era would be attained by the normal processes of history, for God had prearranged all human events and, through the prophets, had made known His will. Even Maimonides did not see any progress toward this goal in the events of his day, looking for confirmation of his faith to the verses of Scripture and the traditions of his family. In his letter to the Yemenites he tentatively expressed the hope that the Messiah would appear in his own generation.

Nevertheless, we can find in Maimonides the seeds of a philosophy of historical progress. For he affirmed the Resurrection and the fantasies of the “world to come” not as true ideas, but only as beliefs necessary for the maintenance of the community. And in both Christianity and Islam he saw the divine impulse at work, preparing the ground for the ultimate triumph of the “true faith.”

Nahmanides and his school did not envision the fulfillment of the Messianic dream in any progressive manner. The belief in the Messiah was a dogmatic assertion, of the same type as the Resurrection, and as little given to progressive realization. The authors of the apocalyptic Midrashim, one and all, envisioned a series of catastrophes, taxing human endurance and culminating in disasters from which only a few survivors will escape. The help of the Lord will come suddenly. Human repentance can hasten the coming of the Messiah, but repentance was conceived by the romantics and the mystics in purely dogmatic terms.
In general, the pietists of Judaism did not see any progressive improvement in the behavior of their contemporaries—either Jews or Gentiles. It is of the essence of Orthodoxy to idealize the past, not the future. “If the people of early times were like angels, we are like men, and if they were men we are donkeys.” Even the wicked men of the past like Balaam and Nebuchadnezzar were conceived to be great in their own way, so that miracles could be performed for their reproof or enlightenment.

A doctrine of the cumulative merit of redemption was contained in Qabbalah, especially as taught in the Lurianic school. But the accumulation of merit was believed to be taking place in the occult essence of the universe, not in the unfolding of the visible events of history.

This question might be phrased in many different ways. Indeed, it underlies almost every issue in theology. The Scholastics distinguished between faith as “trust in God” and faith as “assent” to a proposition. For the believers of the first category, faith is a blend of love, trust and intuition; hence, they will interpret the documents of revelation in accord with the precepts of reason. They will eschew literalism in practice and dogmatism in theory, interpreting the legendry of their faith as parables and the rites of their religion as action-symbols of faith. If, however, faith is conceived not as an insight of the soul but as its submission to an external fiat, reason will not be allowed a decisive role as the source of truth, and moral principles too will be subverted to serve the worldly interests of the “chosen people,” who are pledged to maintain the one and only true faith. The mentality of fundamentalism, deriving from an insistence on the literal truth of the documents of revelation, is inescapably zealous and exclusive. Fundamentalists may accommodate themselves to the pressures and needs of modern society, but they cannot in truth acknowledge the rightness of the values upon which it is founded.

Was Judaism, then, pro-rational or anti-rational? Was it a religion of dogmas, affirmed on the testimony of tradition, or was it a religion
of faith in the inspired guidance of prophets and saints, sages and philosophers?

Here again the answer depends on the particular school of thought within Judaism. The rationalists maintained that revelation and reason concurred fully in their essential import; that revelation provided instruction in those areas where the testimony of reason was indecisive and uncertain; that the documents of revelation needed to be interpreted in the light of reason; that the purpose of revelation was to fortify man's intellectual moral adventure, assuring him of the ultimate success of his efforts, for man's highest values are rooted in eternity.

The romantics and mystics, on the other hand, labored hard and continuously to assert the contrary claim. God takes delight in confounding man's pride of reason. This is why Abraham was tested by the command to sacrifice Isaac. Would Abraham follow the rationalists and refuse the demand of God on the ground of its unreasonableness, or would he slaughter his son in obedience to God and in defiance of reason?

The battle between the rationalists and their opponents can be traced in Judaism to the Biblical period, the contest between the true prophets and the numerous contemporary "prophetizers." The prophets identified the insights of a keen conscience with the will of God, whereas the "prophetizers" sought to find God in an emotional frenzy that extinguished the light of consciousness. And this battle is by no means over. For the human situation renews for us perennially the choice between placing our faith in the testimony of a revered tradition or in that of our heart and mind.

There is an active, open-eyed, open-minded and open-hearted type of piety, arising out of the projection of man's highest values against the cosmic curtain of eternity. Opposed to this piety of the harmonious personality there is the religion of those who are predominantly moved by fear—fear of the dark depths of their own souls. Psychologically speaking, they need a faith of closed horizons, shutting the doors tight against the longing of the soul; hemming it in by the barriers of dogma and by a rigid regimen of conduct that is presumed to be unalterable. The affirmation of a dogma is for them an action-symbol, setting limits to the restless dynamism of heart and mind which they deeply distrust.

Proponents of both alternatives and of some mediating positions as well will find in the treasures of Judaism ample support for their views.
This question is couched in modern terms, reflecting distinctions which are meaningful only in a society where religion and politics are separated. Nevertheless, in our survey of the development of Jewish thought we have dealt continuously with the wider implications of this distinction. On several different occasions we distinguished between Judaism as a structure of universal ideals and sentiments, rites and symbols, and Judaism as sublimated ethnicism, refined by a high ethical tradition and associated with a great religious tradition.

In the current of rationalistic Judaism, the motives of ethnicism dwindle into relative insignificance. Maimonides' interpretation of the Jewish faith does not assume a wide gulf between Jews and the rest of mankind. The mizvot of the Torah are only educational devices. Judaism is an excellent school. But some men will go through the best schools, learning very little, and others, studying in mediocre institutions or even self-taught, will find their way to the presence of the Almighty. Even the Messianic era was conceived by Maimonides not primarily as an epoch of national triumph but as an era of universal good will, when all men will accept the "true faith," surrender the follies of national ambition and devote themselves to philosophical meditations.

"The sages and the prophets longed for the days of the Messiah, not in order that they might govern the whole world, lording it over the pagans and being exalted by all nations; nor that they might eat, drink and rejoice, but in order that they might enjoy the leisure to engage in the study of Torah and wisdom, free from interference and oppression, attaining thus to life eternal." 12

Albo spoke of the general category of a "Divine Torah," allowing the possibility of several divine faiths, each suited to the varied circumstances of people living in different portions of the globe. To be sure, in his Epistle to the Yemenites, Maimonides hews close to the line of ethnic zealotry, forced as he was to appeal to the sentiments and mentality of simple-minded people, "of women and children." Similarly, we encounter concessions to popular prejudice in all the writings of ratio-
nalistic Judaism. But essentially and in principle, philosophical Judaism was universalistic and free from the zealotries of ethnicism. In this respect the current of philosophical Judaism continued, widened and deepened the sparkling mountain streams of prophecy. For the great prophets, too, defined religion by means of universal and ethical standards; combatted the ethnic pride and prejudice of their contemporaries; conceived of the “congregation of Israel” in the ideal terms of the loyal remnant and looked forward to the conversion of all mankind.

To be sure, in the books of prophecy we occasionally encounter verses reflecting ethnic pride and prejudice. The prophets were children of their time as well as geniuses of faith. Ethnic zealotry was after all part of their environment. Their genius was manifested, however, not when they yielded to the sentiments of the people, but when they confronted their contemporaries with new ideas and sought to redirect national zeal into spiritual channels.

On the other hand, there is no lack of support for the ethnic conception in the central ideas of nonphilosophical Judaism, in the romantic and in the mystical currents of thought. The Talmud operates consistently on the supposition of a wide and deep chasm, yawning between Jewry and “the nations.”

The sages of the Talmud differed on such issues as whether Jews are called “children of God” regardless of the quality of their piety and the ethics of their conduct; whether the “pious of the nations” do or do not have a share in the “world to come”; whether the term “man” in the Torah refers to Israelites only or to all men; whether the severe laws in the Pentateuch regarding the neighboring nations of Palestine were to be applied in the centuries following the destruction of the Temple; whether or not proselytes should be sought out and welcomed; whether or not the dietary laws should be made progressively more stringent, so as to interpose a more forbidding barrier between Jews and Gentiles. The liberal position was never lacking in Judaism, but at times it was overwhelmed and overruled.

In romantic and mystical Judaism, the Jewish people is elevated to the rank of a “superhumanity” which alone is capable of communing with God. The term “the God of Israel” is interpreted literally to suggest an intimate, organic and exclusive relationship, as if God could be revealed to mankind only by the agency of the people of Israel. As we noted before, the Qabbalists taught that only the souls of Jews were derived from the Supreme Being. Gentiles were even forbidden to study the
Torah, according to the authorities belonging to this school, for the Torah was the private possession of the one people that God loves and protects by His Providence. Even the lofty concept of the Messianic era was frequently perverted in popular literature and distorted by the proponents of this view so as to express the bitter frustration of a persecuted people rather than the noble vision of inspired prophets. The Messiah was to avenge the wrongs perpetrated against Jewish people and compensate them for their years of suffering, restoring to Jews their rightful position as “sons of Kings.” This caricature of the Messianic vision, however, was rarely allowed to stand unchallenged, uncorrected and untransformed by the refining genius of philosophical piety.

(8) IN VIEW OF THE MANIFOLD TENSIONS AND POLARITIES IN JEWISH THOUGHT CAN WE SPEAK OF THE “MAINSTREAM” OF JUDAISM?

Subjectively, it is certainly quite natural and almost inevitable for contemporary writers to identify their own interpretation of Judaism as the “mainstream.” Throughout our discussion, we have not failed to make clear our own alignment with the rationalistic school, which is sometimes also designated as the current of philosophical Judaism. We believe that God reveals Himself primarily through the twin lights of conscience and intelligence and that the written documents of revelation need to be interpreted in the light of the living Word of revelation. We believe that this recognition of the primacy of the living Word is the central insight of Judaism, a faith that was hammered out of teachings of prophets and sages. While the “prophetizers” of the Bible and of Canaanite culture were presumably passive vessels in the grip of their “frenzy,” the Hebrew prophets identified the “still, small voice” of a sacred, sensitive conscience with the voice of the Lord.

At the same time, we must not forget that Judaism is far larger than any school of thought. Objectively, we cannot ignore nor make light of the other currents of Judaism. Nonphilosophical Judaism, with its rigid, legalistic mentality, was at all times a potent reality. The vast, darkly shadowed halls of Qabbalah constitute part of the Jewish tradition, and the self-exalting works of the Romantic school, rhapsodizing on the “unique” glories of the Jewish soul, are among the treasured possessions of the faith. We may, if we choose, consider the philosophical interpre-
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tation as the "mainstream," or the "essence," or as being "normative"; but then we need to acknowledge frankly that we follow our own personal preference.

In the modern period there have appeared a plethora of popular books, all purporting to describe the "essence" of Judaism. As a rule the author's private interpretation of what is "true" or "authentic" is given as the "essence," and all that does not fit into his category is dismissed as relatively unimportant, unauthentic or marginal. Sometimes, too, the old casuistic skills of our Talmud-trained ancestors are made use of to prove that contradictions do not annoy the "unique" genius of the Jewish mentality, which thinks in terms of "both-and," not "either-or" categories. As we have noted, opposing points of view were due to the clash of diverse currents of thought within the tradition, not to a unique faculty or a peculiar logic. Such efforts at romantic self-aggrandizement would be laughable if they were not tragic reminders of the essential similarity of human nature the world over. It is precisely the defenders of the "uniqueness" of German genius, Polish genius, Russian genius, etc., who glory in a similar discovery of the "transnational" domain, where the categories of the intellect are inapplicable, and dreams of ethnic superiority can be indulged to the heart's content.

Actually, Judaism as a great religious tradition reflects diverse approaches and insights which are organized in different patterns to suit the varying mentalities which compose a world-wide community. In his massive work, A Study of History, Prof. Arnold J. Toynbee attempts to prove that the great religions reflect the different psychological structures of mankind, with each religious tradition corresponding to one psychological type. As a matter of fact, all variations of character are found in every people, and a great tradition growing over a long period of time will naturally reflect the insights and needs of every important category of human personality.

However, this reasonable approach to the mysteries of faith was countered by equally powerful trends toward dogmatism. Thus, the self-righteous dogmatist, who bans and burns the books of his opponents, is not an unfamiliar figure in the history of Jewish thought.

For a variety of historical reasons, conflicting positions were tolerated within the confines of Judaism. The awesome greatness of God was felt so powerfully that the sages were disposed to recognize the legitimacy of different approaches. The heart of so great a mystery cannot be
reached by any single pathway. For the proponents of a nondogmatic faith, it appears reasonable enough to project shafts of light into the cosmic mystery from many different angles, without being able to see how they fall into a consistent and logical pattern. The prophetic-rationalistic school of Jewish thought naturally favored this attempt to see God and His works from a great diversity of standpoints. Fortunately, the cause of tolerance was aided by the circumstances that the law can more easily take account of actions than of thoughts, and Jewish piety was molded in the patterns of legalism. So the actions of the Jew were regulated with the utmost zeal and precision, while his thoughts were allowed a relative measure of freedom.

Finally, the most decisive factor in the creation of a wide domain of tolerance within the tradition of Jewish theology was the absence of an all-powerful central authority. It is in the conflict of cultures and in the mutual confrontation of diverse points of view that philosophy comes to life and flourishes. In the Biblical period, prophets vied against priests and against kings. By the Second Commonwealth, there was only a narrow area where Sadducees and Pharisees could agree. Besides the official academies, there was always the free proliferation of private schools, and their traditions achieved recognition in the course of time. The Babylonian Gaonate dominated the Jewish scene only for a few centuries, and their authority was challenged by the Qaraite. When the power of the Geonim was broken, Jewish intellectuals needed to take into account only the guidance of their own conscience, the opinion of their colleagues and the broad areas of agreement among the people generally.

Consequently, a rich and many-sided tradition came into being which reflected the full spectrum of colors resulting from the focusing of Divine light upon the various psychic planes of the prism of human genius.

In view of the diversity of trends within the stream of Jewish thought, wherein does the unity of the Jewish tradition consist? We find the unifying principle 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 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 wor-
ship, home ritual and everyday life.

As the stream flows, some of its waters are evaporated by wind and
sun; and fresh rivulets bring new waters from the countryside; stagnant
pools form here and there in the low marshlands as well as rushing
eddies in narrow defiles; yet the stream is one, the unpracticed eye
noticing scarcely any distinction among its waters, while the experi-
enced sailor can sail up the stream, from the channels in the delta to its
sources in the mountains of antiquity.

The context is the total life of the Jewish community. It is impossible
to separate the evolution of ideas in Judaism from the social and eco-
nomic forces in Jewish history. The unity of Jewish communal life,
fashioned by many historic forces, provided a forum for the airing of
opposing views and the conciliation of conflicting opinions.

The nature of the communal bedrock for the flow of Jewish thought
changed in the course of time from the confederacy of twelve tribes to
a unified nation and from the political unity of a nation to the social
unity of a religious community. The effective meaning of the category
of a religious community did not remain static. At all times, Jewishness
involved awareness of a very real communal setup. The bedrock and
channels were there, painfully real, even if observers differed concerning
its nature and proper designation.

In addition, certain emphases belong to the tradition as a whole,
characterizing its every facet in greater or lesser degree. The emphases
on God’s unity, on the rationality and goodness of His Will, on the
freedom of the human personality, on the ethical vocation of man and
his destiny as a “partner of the Lord”—all these emphases, different
though their significance may be in the different currents of Jewish
thought, belong to the spiritual impetus of Judaism as a whole.

These emphases are of special significance in the consideration of the
place of Judaism within the larger context of the Judeo-Christian tradi-
tion. As against the Christian challenge concerning the divine nature of
Jesus, all branches of Judaism upheld the rationalistic-ethical position. We have had occasion to mention Nahmanides' contention that the "mind of a Jew" will never consent to the proposition that God became man, being born out of the womb of a woman, or that God needed to sacrifice "His son," in order to atone for the sins of mankind and compensate for the corruption of "original sin." Nahmanides belonged to the mystical current of Judaism; nevertheless, as against Christian dogma, he too employed the weapons of reason and the objective validity of ethical principles.

This contrast runs through every domain of religious expression. The rational and moral nature of God precludes His devising a method of salvation which is based on the acceptance of dogma and the surrender of the faculty of moral judgment.

Men must be judged by their "works," not by their faith. The good God could not have predetermined any individual or group of individuals for perdition. God requires from us, not the feelings of trust and total surrender, but our co-operation in the building of His Kingdom. God is love, but love is not the sheer feeling of benevolence; it is sustained devotion to the construction of the ideal society in this world. If religion be conceived as a field of tension between the pole of active, rational and moral piety, devoted to the "daytime" spirit of optimistic and constructive idealism, and the pole of passive, emotional piety, esthetic and reflective, devoted to the "nighttime" spirit of love, peace and goodwill, then Judaism, in all its diversity, will be found closer to the first pole. While the love of God in Islam is chiefly surrender to His Will, and love in Christianity is primarily an act of self-giving, love in Judaism is devotion to "the fashioning of the world into a Kingdom of God."

So the hero-image of Judaism is primarily the prophet, fighting for truth and justice, and secondarily the sage, studying and outlining the ideal patterns of the good life; the hero-image of Christianity is the mystic, whose soul has sounded the depths of the mystery of existence, and secondarily the saint who suffers in love for the sake of humanity.

The challenge of Judaism tends to make the Christian world more prophetic, more communal minded, more rational and ethical, more concerned with the "works" of love. The Christian challenge to Judaism tends to break down the self-exalting impetus of ethnicism and to caution against the externalization of religion and its hardening into a
series of lifeless rituals. The rationalistic school in Judaism has always been responsive to the variety of intellectual and esthetic challenges posed to it by its daughter religion.

We cannot conclude our review of the currents of thought in historic Judaism without taking account of the question that has come to loom so large throughout the modern period: What is the significance of the Jewish tradition for western civilization and humanity as a whole?

It was the current of philosophical Judaism that placed the greatest emphasis on the concept of the Jew as the custodian of eternal truths for the sake of all mankind. But we found ourselves dealing with radically different versions of these truths. What happens to the concept of treasuring eternal truths if the exponents of Judaism differ so radically on the understanding of these truths?

We do not and cannot claim to know all about God nor all about man's need for salvation. As Jews, we do not strike the pose of all-knowing prophets, but rather “sons of prophets,” determined seekers of truth. The Jews are heirs of a hundred generations of deeply earnest men and women who sought God by the feeble lights in their possession. They denied themselves many things for the sake of their faith, forsaking the luxuries of life and even life itself when the test came, but they never denied the God of their heart. The history of the Jewish faith is the magnificent tale of an endless quest by a world-wide community, a community of people remaining true to its search in spite of many temptations and refusing to compromise with its conscience.

The Jews became an eternal people because they set for themselves an endless task, a task that may never be consummated but that will be brought ever closer to realization. This task is all-embracing, presenting a challenge in every aspect of life. Because Judaism asserts the doctrine of God's unity, the task of comprehending His work in nature and in history is a never-ending challenge to human thought. God's unity cannot be comprehended within finite time, for the task of synthesizing all categories of wisdom expands as our knowledge grows. By insisting that human nature contains the “image of God,” Judaism released a powerful, revolutionary force making for freedom and justice. This too is an impetus driving toward wide and then wider horizons, for the meaning of freedom and justice is unfolded only through the diverse processes of history. Because the Jewish religion is based on the doctrine of a covenant with God, the intellectual-ethical domain becomes the
common ground of man and God. But the implications of this covenant at a particular time or in the vision of the future are worked out anew by every generation.

Abstract truths susceptible of verbal formulation belong to the universal society of scholars and thinkers. They can in no way be staked out as a private domain by any people or any community. A religious tradition represents the application of truth to the total life of a community, and this application of accumulated insights to the problems of life requires the agency of institutions, the charm of rites and the momentum of the love and loyalty of generations. But the task of applying eternal truths to temporary situations is never finally accomplished. Here is where the experience and wisdom of one tradition poses a challenge to and serves as a corrective for another tradition.

It is important to bear in mind the distinction between eternal truths and their embodiment in institutions. Abstract truths are best conveyed through books and through instruction within the academic world. The applied truths of religion, affecting as they do the whole of life, are transmitted through the institutions and practices of a living, historical community. Eternal truths are invigorated with the sinews of life by the impetus and scope of a vital tradition, but religious traditions may hinder as well as help the continuing application of truth to the ever-changing stream of life. A tradition may hallow a temporary application and erect it as a barrier against the free interaction of thought and life. The very greatness of a tradition, recording the successful confrontation of great problems with eternal truths in ages past may cause its adherents to become unduly worshipful of instruments and institutions, unduly arrogant toward other faiths and psychologically unable to meet fresh situations with creative vigor. The wholeheartedness and finality of a religious tradition preserves the spirited momentum of the past, but it tends to hallow the static solution rather than the ever-dynamic method. Hence, the mutual confrontation of two or more traditions is always helpful for the maintenance of their power of self-criticism and self-renewal.

The significance of the Jewish tradition within the larger context of western civilization consists precisely of the challenge it presents to other religious traditions. The historic stream of Judaism flows beside other streams, reflecting the same great tensions and problems within a different context and containing different solutions. It is because of the sameness of eternal truth and the difference of historic experience that
Judaism confronts the other great religions with a creative and continuing challenge.

Jewish apologists felt themselves constrained in the past to insist on the "uniqueness" of Judaism. They thought that Judaism could be esteemed as being of surpassing worth only if it were known as different from all other faiths in a deep and essential sense. Judaism, they felt, could be protected from the criticism that is freely directed at other traditions only if it were shown to be "unique." But the claim of uniqueness is itself far from being unique. Romantic writers of every nation and religious tradition love this word, for it seems to mark out a charmed circle, free from the revolving sword of reason. Actually, Judaism is unique in the same sense that other faiths are unique—as a compound, not as a chemical element. We have shown the variety of responses within it to the challenges of the hour. Each school of thought responded in the idiom used by the corresponding schools in other traditions. The history of Jewish thought, in all its multifarious expression, is of universal significance because it is the account of responses to perennial universal problems. Dealing with the great polar tensions of one religion, it reflects the dynamic forces in all religious cultures.

These polar tensions are threefold in character, corresponding to the three dimensions of every faith: its ideological structure and its search for truth; its institutional character, consisting of its rites and forms of worship; its sociological structure, outlining the duties of the individual to the other members of the "in" group, and the relation of the "in" group to the rest of mankind. These three dimensions correspond to a classification of Judaism attributed to Simon the Just—Torah (learning), Avodah (worship) and Gemiluth Hassadim (social obligations and acts of loving kindness).

The first polar tension is between the belief in one true faith and the assertion that all faiths are equally good and true for their worshipers. This tension may also be described in terms of the contrast between the subjective approach, which sanctions all that is one's own, and the objective point of view, which rises above all possessive prejudices.

Both the dogmatists and the relativists, the intellectual isolationists and the champions of impartiality, find it easy to define their positions and to stake out their claims. But neither the cause of truth nor the spiritual welfare of humanity is served by them, for the spirit of man is expressed in both subjective feeling and objective thought. The authen-
tic response of the human soul to this polarity is to find a dynamic balance of the two moods, resulting in a mediating position between the two extremes.

Within the Jewish tradition, we find several ways in which this tension was resolved. While the solutions of the past may not be entirely adequate for the problems of the present, they should not be ignored in searching for new solutions.

The second polar tension of religious tradition is that between the inner and outer expressions of the faith, between the emphasis on "the service of the heart" and the sacramental concept of ritual acts. Religions are inevitably articulated in institutions, myths and rites; else they are still-born abstractions. But the moment they are expressed in external actions, the danger arises of the external performance becoming a hallowed end in itself instead of being only an aid to piety. Hence, the dilemma: no religion without rituals; yet how often do the ritual acts stifle the inner life of the faith!

In some Christian circles, this polar tension is described as the contrast between Pharisaic Judaism and early Christianity. This hoary accusation is a delusion based upon the caricature of the ancient Pharisees and of Judaism. Actually, in Jewish tradition, we encountered several different ways of meeting this perennial problem of organized religion.

The third polar tension is perhaps the most important in our modern world. We find it the more difficult to visualize because we are ourselves caught up in its coils. It is the tension centering round the concept of a "chosen people." 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.

The problem of a “chosen people” is not peculiar to Judaism, since every religious tradition of necessity accords supreme significance to the collective existence of its devotees. This tension is inseparable too from the impetus of nationalism, which in modern times has achieved, more than once, the devotions due religion. However, in Jewish tradition, the polar tension in the concept of the “chosen people” has had an unusually long and many-sided development. No one can expect to contribute to the resolution of this perennial problem without taking account of the variety of ways in which this problem was viewed in the long record of Jewish experience.

In sum, the significance of the Jewish tradition transcends the limits of the Jewish community.

The Jew does not claim to be the sole custodian of eternal truths, but he does set for himself the endless task of applying eternal truths to the changing problems of life. The Jewish people are heirs of a long tradition of truthful search. Within this tradition, we find different approaches to the solution of those perennial problems of a living faith, which every generation encounters afresh.

NOTES

2. The contrast between the active and passive moods of piety is well drawn by Josiah Royce in his *The Spirit of Modern Philosophy* (Boston 1897). Among recent theologians, James Parkes construes the difference between Judaism and Christianity in terms of this contrast. The opinions of Orthodox authorities concerning the organ are collected in the booklet *Aile Divrai Hابrith.*
4. Tosefta, *Sanhedrin,* 13. See *Masekheth Gerim,* Chap. 1, where a prospective convert to Judaism is at first discouraged, but if he persists he is told, “The world was created only for the sake of Israel, who alone are called ‘sons of the All-Present’ and alone are beloved of Him. All the discouraging words we spoke to you were for the purpose of increasing your reward.”
5. *Berokhoth,* 33 b.
6. *Aboth* 3; 15.
7. *Aboda Zara,* 10 b.
9. Ibid., 99a.