THE COVENANT CONCEPT—PARTICULARISTIC, PLURALISTIC, OR FUTURISTIC?

IN A DRAFT STATEMENT by a group of rabbis attending an interfaith seminar, the following sentence occurred: "It must be emphasized that the traditional Jew cannot conceive of God entering into a covenant with another special group of humans".

Since the statement was tentative, the authors asking that it "not be reproduced or printed", we do not here identify the source. But the harsh exclusiveness of this sentence is so painfully clear that it may well serve as an introduction to our theme.

Naturally, the term "the traditional Jew", can be taken in the sense of the average person, the man in the street. We can hardly expect to encounter theological sophistication at streetcorners. Still, the purpose of all theology is to affect the thought and feeling of the common man. In that sense, this assertion may not be fallacious. But if tradition be taken in its fullness, then this remark is as untrue as it is naive. What is the meaning of the covenant in traditional Judaism?—Is it as simplistic and exclusive as the quoted statement implies? Or does it allow for a pluralistic conception with the possibility being projected of several covenants valid simultaneously, or does the very nature of a covenant with the Transcendent God exclude the presumption of knowing God's Will, in its fullness?—If so, other covenants with other peoples cannot be ruled out.

Our analysis will deal with the covenant concept in Judaism, but the implications of our study are manifestly ecumenical. In each of the three
monotheistic faiths—Judaism, Christianity, Islam—the same dilemmas and problems, even if not the same solutions, will be found.

We begin with the covenant concept, as it appears in the Hebrew Scriptures. The biblical authors were searching for an apt metaphor of man’s encounter with God. They thought of God as Creator of “heaven and earth”; they experienced God’s “nearness” to their hearts and souls; they were certain of His sustaining power—“underneath are the everlasting arms”; they despised the superstitions and abominations of the pagans, and by way of contrast knew themselves to be uniquely favored, exalted, chosen, loved; they yearned for a concrete practice or symbol that would serve as a perpetual reminder of the fleeting moments of exultant faith. While they were aware of the human impossibility of grasping the fullness of the Divine Will, they, humanly enough, sought to imprison the Infinite within the bounds of the finite. The concept of a universal emperor governing his far flung empire indirectly, through intermediaries, and covenanting with one people as objects of his special concern seemed to fit these experiences.

In essence, the golden moments of revelation occur in the lives of all people. Deep crises and existential contradictions are followed by the reassertion of the familiar landmarks of the spirit. This rebound from anomie and despair is at times synthetic rather than a return to the status quo ante. Surges of reassurance in the value and truth of a transmitted tradition, serve to integrate newly perceived spiritual ideals with the practices of the past. An illumination suggestive of infinite horizons supervenes upon an intoxicating enthusiasm for a particular tradition, bounded by fixed dogmas and ethnocentric myths.

The prophetic experience of revelation is the general faith-event in our life, molded by an impassioned ethical concern and articulated poetically. Faith is an event, a process, a pulsation, as are all things in an organismic universe. In this event, the Whole becomes an overwhelming reality to a person, in thought as truth, in feeling as love, in the resolve so to act as to repeat the experience. Love generates the yearning for more love and the determination to make oneself and society fit “dwelling places for the Shechinah”.

The faith-event contains several polarities—God is transcendent, yet He is somehow “near to those who call upon Him in truth”. He is the One God of all mankind, but He chooses certain persons, peoples, moments, to express His Will. He demands loyalty and faithfulness to
all that is humane and ethical, but also loyalty and faithfulness to Himself.\textsuperscript{4} He favors that which all good men everywhere feel is good and right, but He also demands specific sanctifying rituals, which are peculiar to His service—"be ye holy, for I am holy".\textsuperscript{5} Above all, His Will is both clear and elusive—clear enough to be known by every person, in his "solitariness", or in his moments of "ultimate concern", but also He is so elusive that only when people are given a "new heart and new spirit" can they truly serve Him.\textsuperscript{6}

In sum, in the moments of revelation, we experience three dimensions of feelings—each with its own Yea and Nay. Reassurance—the Transcendent God is "near" to the pious, as Protector and Redeemer; but also far, with all our insights being feeble stabs in the dark—"the Lord is in His holy temple, let the whole world be silent before Him".\textsuperscript{7} Reorientation to specific ideals and goals, along with an awareness of His concern for all men and the elusiveness of His Will. Rededication to the quest of His nearness, in the future, since in the present the bounds of finitude cannot encompass the Infinite. The negative awareness, that we can neither comprehend nor impose limits on either His Being or His Will or His Purpose, is as integral to the experience of revelation as the affirmative grasp of some commands or symbols, which were associated with holiness at a particular time and place.

Indeed, the knowledge that we do not know God's Will is as essential to the Divine encounter in monotheism as the same affirmation in the philosophy of Socrates. The first two of the ten commandments "were spoken by the Power itself", we are told in the Talmud.\textsuperscript{8} The other eight were pronounced by Moses. In other words, the Divine encounter itself contains only a Yea—God is here as Revealer and as Redeemer, and a Nay—no words and no figures can represent Him fully. So, when Moses asked "to see His Glory", he was told that only fleeting memories of His having passed, metaphorically, "His back" could be apprehended.\textsuperscript{9}

Biblical religion, we must remember, was unique, not in its affirmation of a revelation or a covenant, for these were common convictions in the pagan world. The uniqueness of the biblical faith lay in its negation—the One God towers above and beyond any representation or any revelation. In dedicating the Holy Temple as "the dwelling place" of God, King Solomon stated, "The Lord has chosen to dwell in darkness".\textsuperscript{10}
n view of the twofold cutting edge of revelation, we may well inquire whether the covenant concept can serve as an adequate metaphor for the experience of revelation. Manifestly, the concept itself varied greatly even in the earliest periods of the Hebrew Scriptures. There was the contract between equals, two friends, or man and wife. More typical of the ancient world was the contract between a godlike King and his vassals. The famed biblical scholar, Harry Orlinsky, maintains that the former experience was paradigmatic to the biblical authors.

"In the view of the biblical writers, God and Israel had entered voluntarily into a contract as equal partners to serve and further the interests of one another exclusively".¹¹

While he allows that the biblical authors assumed the existence of a concurrent covenant with humanity, he does not provide for the sense of infinite horizons in any genuine religious experience. In a note, he disputes the validity of "the vassal type of covenant of ancient peoples".¹²

In our view, his interpretation fits some passages of the Bible. But, it is altogether inadequate for the understanding of the spectrum of meanings in the biblical covenant concept. The tensions and paradoxes within the concept ranged from the seemingly arbitrary Divine choice of and covenant with Abraham to the absence of a Divine commitment in the Faithful Agreement of Ezra and Nehemiah.¹³ Abraham's call is described as a kind of exodus, the beginning of the destiny of Israel. And it is stated in terms of universality—"and all the nations of the earth will be blessed through you".¹⁴ The dimension of "not yet" is echoed in the prediction of 400 years of slavery and torment for the children of Israel. The one note of "equality" is detectable in Abraham's bold outcry—"can it be that the judge of the entire earth will not do justice?"¹⁵ But, even then Abraham acts as a spokesman for humanity, who is also a humble petitioner, not an equal partner.

The covenant of Ezra and Nehemiah is concluded not between God and men but between the leading men of Jerusalem themselves. There is no reference in the introductory prayer of Ezra and Nehemiah to the covenant of Moses either at Sinai or in the plains of Moab. At Sinai God gave commands, true Torah, good mitzvot.¹⁶ God commands and the Jew obeys. Nehemiah's only reference to a covenant is to the one concluded with Abraham, "the father of a multitude of nations".

As we survey the various references to a covenant in the Hebrew Scriptures, we find that this notion is open-ended in several ways; it is
counterbalanced by several other covenants—the covenant with mankind, represented by Adam and Eve, also by Noah and his descendants; with Abraham as the father of all who convert. Indeed the call for a renewal of the covenant in the future is integral to the awareness of a covenant in the past.

Moses himself felt the need of renewing the covenant in the prairies of Moab; so did Joshua, Jehoiada, and King Josiah. Special covenants were drawn up in order to achieve national reforms—to free the Hebrew slaves in Jerusalem and to expel the foreign women. In addition, special covenants were made with the children of Levi, of Aaron and of David.

The prophets were uncomfortable with the notion of setting conditions for and limitations upon God's Will. God's relations with Israel were due to His goodness, His love, His compassion. The first Isaiah does not mention the word, covenant. His call for Israel's loyalty draws upon the natural feelings of gratitude for special favors. Isaiah was keenly conscious of the transcendent majesty of the Lord—the "mysticum tremendum" of holiness. "High as are the heavens above the earth, so high are My thoughts to your thoughts". Hosea accuses the people of transgressing the covenant, "like Adam", referring possibly to generally human sins. Amos speaks of Israel's singularity in "being known" to God, but he also affirms that "they (Israelites) are like the children of the Ethiopians unto me".

In the later prophets, the notion of a covenant is referred to the future and its very meaning is spiritualized. Hosea describes the future covenant when war will be no more and Israel will be betrothed in steadfast love, in compassion and in faithfulness. Jeremiah speaks of "putting the Torah in the hearts of the people" as a new covenant. Ezekiel predicts "a covenant of peace, an eternal covenant". Deutero-Isaiah foretells in one of the "Servant" chapters a new creation of the people whereby they will be transformed "into a covenanted people, a light to the nations". Malachi's "angel of the covenant" also belongs to the future and is apparently concerned with the purification of the ritual.

Manifestly, many of the biblical authors were keenly aware of the dangers inherent in the notion of the covenant—the narcissistic feeling of superiority; the legalistic tendency to reduce a living faith to so many fragmented practices; the confining of the transcendent and eternal God within the narrow limits of a time-conditioned body of specifica-
tions. In sum, the covenant concept may easily be corrupted to the point of shutting out the openness of the faith-event, its dynamism, its infinite outreach. To counter the formalism inherent in the covenant concept, the Bible frequently adds the words, *hesed*, steadfast love, or *shalom*, peace, to the word, *berit*, covenant.

The tensions within the covenant concept became more marked during the Hellenistic period. It suffices to note that Philo hardly refers to any covenant. In his life of Abraham, he writes of the divine commands written in nature as well as in the Torah. Abraha m's migrations are symbolic of "the search for the true God". Abraham was "himself a law and an unwritten statute". He stresses the humanistic purpose of the choice of Israel—"the nation dearest of all to God, which as I hold, received the gift of priesthood and prophecy on behalf of all mankind".

As the latest edition of the Theological Dictionary of the New Testament summarizes the evolution of the covenant idea in the Septuagint and Philo,

"The divine will self-revealed in history and establishing religion—this is the religious concept of the *diathiki* in the LXX and it represents a significant development of the Hebrew term even while preserving its essential content".

"Even in Philo the firmly developed religious concept shines through the enveloping imagery. The term is obviously a formula for the gracious will of God disclosed in history".

Paul's development of covenant theology by contrasting the covenant of Abraham with that of Moses and the covenant of spirit with that of the letter set the stage for a bitter polemic with the Jewish Sages. Matthew's formulation of Jesus' saying at the Last Supper brought Paul's interpretation into the central life of the Church.

The third century rabbis countered by asserting that "Abraham our father observed all the commandments of the Torah, even to the mixing of cooked food" (a rabbinically-instituted ordinance, whereby one was permitted to prepare food on a holiday for the Sabbath). Both religions were dominated frequently by the champions of an exclusionist theology.

However, even in the ancient world, non-exclusionist voices were
heard from time to time. The tannaitic sages affirmed the validity of the
Seven Laws of Noah, that is, of the universal revelation of ethics and
faith.\(^{37}\) They also declared that true prophets arose among the Gen-
tiles.\(^{38}\) A prophet, as the rabbis taught, was a messenger sent to a
particular people. In other words, more than one valid body of revealed
laws is possible. We recall that while the Stoics believed in the universal
dissemination of “seeds of reason”, the rabbis regarded Wisdom itself as
deriving from the Supreme Being.\(^{39}\) Indeed, for the rabbis, Wisdom
was a concomitant of Torah, inseparable from the Torah itself, the gift
of revelation. “If there is no wisdom, there is no piety; if there is no
piety, there is no wisdom”.\(^{40}\) In this spirit Rabban Gamliel defended
Peter and the apostles, offering a pragmatic counsel—“Refrain from
these men and let them alone, for if this counsel or this work be of
men, it will come to naught, but if it be of God, ye cannot overthrow
it; lest haply ye be found to fight even against God”.\(^{41}\) The head of the
Pharisaic school allowed that there might be other versions of revelation
than those entrusted to his care. Similarly, at the trial of Paul, when
Gentile Christians were already a dominant factor, the Pharisees de-
clared, “We find no evil in this man; but if a spirit or an angel hath
spoken to him, let us not fight against God”.\(^{42}\)

These liberal opinions were echoed in The Ethics of the Fathers, where
an Alexandrine Sage declares that “an ecclesia for the sake of heaven is
certain to endure”.\(^{43}\) We can hardly doubt that he referred to the
Christian church—it endures because it is inspired by the love of God.
Another second century Sage asserted that a Gentile who sincerely
engages in the study of Torah—either of the universal teachings of
Noah or the Law of Judaism—is like the High Priest, who enters the
Holy of HOLIES.\(^{44}\)

Such voices, however, were rare in the troubled centuries of the
ancient world. The predominant atmosphere of the Talmud was zeal-
ously exclusive. The Gentiles, taken as a whole, were presumed to have
violated the Noachide laws.\(^{45}\) They were therefore utterly condemned.
Satan’s corruption had marred their judgment; their only chance is to
convert to Judaism when the Messiah comes; in that case they will enter
the dubious category of “unwilling converts” (gerim genuim).\(^{46}\) The
Israelites, too, would not have accepted the Torah, if they had been free
to follow their own inclinations. But the Lord lifted up the mountain-
range of Sinai and held it over their heads, threatening to bury them if
they did not consent to abide by the Torah. It was only in the time of
Mordecai and Esther, a millenium or so after Moses, that the Israelites proved themselves to be willing martyrs for the sake of Torah.47

Did the biblical authors believe that God could not or would not conclude a Torah-like covenant with other peoples?—There appears to be no warrant for any such belief. Isaiah looked forward to a triumvirate of the chosen:

“In that day Israel will be the third with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing in the midst of the earth, whom the Lord of hosts has blessed, saying ‘Blessed be Egypt my people, and Assyria the work of my hands, and Israel my heritage’ ”.48 The notion that all genuine worship is addressed to the One God is implied by Malachi.

“For from the rising of the sun to its setting my name is great among the nations, and in every place incense is offered to my name, and a pure offering; for my name is great among the nations, says the Lord of hosts”.49

Zephaniah compares the diverse rituals of the various nations to a babel of languages, which will be turned into “pure speech”, the worship of the One God.50

As to the Sages of the Talmud, we noted their ambivalence. We encounter references to an oath that God took not to transfer His covenant to other nations.51 His faithfulness precluded any revocation of His relationship to Israel, as Paul argued in Romans 9–11, but it did not prevent Him from adding new persons to His people or contrariwise reducing His people to the barest minimum. No one questioned that the Messianic Age would witness the conversion of all nations to the true faith of Israel.52 And the “light of the Messiah” might appear slowly and by degrees, like the dawn.53 So, in the eschaton, all mankind will be included in God’s plan of redemption.

To be sure, the Sages assert that the Lord consented to Moses’ request not to allow His Shechinah to rest on nations other than Israel, but then this tradition reflects the opinion of the exclusionists, who were opposed by the moderates and the rationalists.54

Exclusive voices predominated, we may assume, in times of bitter polemic and persecution. “Lest you will say that another Moses will bring us another Torah from heaven . . . (we are assured) that no part of it was left in heaven”.55 Here, then, the negational phase of revelation, the humble acknowledgment of finitude is totally ignored. As a rule, the Sages were reluctant to set up categorical distinctions between the several non-Jewish faiths, exempting some, like the Christians and the
Zoroastrians, from the general category of idolatry. They spoke of the Noachide principles in general, and in specific cases, a Sage could testify, "I know this or that Gentile is not an idol-worshipper." They also observed that "the Gentiles outside the borders of the land of Israel are not idolators, but they are simply following the customs of their fathers".

In respect of non-Jews, then, only God can tell whether they worshipped Him in truth.

If an entire nation embraced the Jewish faith, then they would feel that they were part of greater Israel. So in the letter of Joseph, the Khazar King, we read that he believed the descent of his people was from Japhet, Noah's son, and Togarmo, but that he trusted "the Lord, God of Israel will hasten our redemption, gather our exiles and our scattered ones. . . ." By joining the faith of Israel he and the Khazar nation became part of the larger people of Israel, sharing in its promise of earthly redemption.

Saadia calls the chapter in his book, dealing with the Sinaitic revelation, "Command and Admonition". All rational laws are obligatory for all men. But "in respect of non-rational laws . . . the Creator added them for us by way of command and admonition in order to multiply our reward and our prosperity on their account".

In his view, the covenant with Abraham, the father of all converts to monotheism, continues to be valid, even after the Torah of Moses was accepted by the Israelites.

In his philosophic work, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, Maimonides does not even refer to the verse which tells of Moses concluding the covenant by the sprinkling of blood on the altar and the people. In his interpretation, the authority of the Torah rests on its truth, as attested by the supreme prophetic genius of Moses, not on any contract, duly drawn up, signed and scaled. The very term, *herit*, covenant, hardly occurs in the *Guide of the Perplexed*.

To be sure, in his ninth principle of faith, Maimonides speaks of the belief that the Torah will never be "exchanged" (*muhalefet*) and that there will never be "a different Torah" (*Torah aheret*) deriving from the Creator. Maimonides did not intend to rule out change and adjustment within the life of Torah, as some commentators imagined, but to assert that in its essence the Torah contains philosophic truth, and truth is immutable. Doubtless, he sought to reinforce Jewish resistance to the belligerent assertions of both Christians and Moslems that their revela-
tions abolished the Torah of Moses. On the other hand, he recognized that the two daughter-faiths of Judaism served to prepare humanity for the Messianic Age by disseminating the ideas of monotheism and the scriptural ethic. The philosopher-poet Judah Halevi suggested the metaphor of a tree with a broad stem and three branches. The fruit produced by the three branches will ultimately contain the same seeds, those planted by Abraham.

The fourteen century philosopher, Joseph Albo, who was called upon to represent Judaism in the famous disputation at Tortosa in 1413–1414 asserted “that it is possible for two divine Torah to be true simultaneously for two different communities”.

Albo argues that the Lord is a physician who may well prescribe different medicines to the same person at different times and to different people at the same time.

But while the medieval rationalists allowed for plural covenants, the mystics and romantics thought otherwise. The oft quoted maxim, “the Holy One, blessed be He, the Torah and Israel are one”, which the authors of the above mentioned draft take as their fundamental maxim, occurs in the Zohar and it reflects the mystical current of Judaism.

Indeed, the mystical ideology taught that Jews were biologically distinguished from the rest of mankind, their souls being rooted in the highest realm of holiness. A very popular mystic wondered at the fact that Gentiles don’t look so very different from Jews, though the souls of the latter derive their sustenance from the Divine Pleroma, while the souls of the former are rooted in the “other side”, the demonic realm.

Here, then, was a Jewish counterpart to the Spanish infatuation with limpieza, limiting posts of responsibility to pure-blooded descendants of “old Christians”, on the ground the Jewish souls were corrupted by centuries of disbelief in Christian dogmas. Characteristic of the opposition between the ethnocentric-mystical interpretation of the covenant and the humanist-rationalist view is the contrast in the two interpretations of the “priestly” function of Israel—offered by Rashi and Seforno respectively. Rashi interprets “priests” as meaning princes, that is, the Israelites will become the governors of all other nations; Seforno asserts “this is the import of a ‘Kingdom of priests,’ to teach and to explain to all men the task of serving God together . . . .”

In the past two centuries, the rationalist-humanistic concept of revelation prevailed in Jewish thought of the western world.

Moses Mendelssohn, the champion of Enlightenment, wrote that the
mark of a false religion is precisely its claim to exclusiveness. Even the unbending defender of uncompromising Orthodoxy, Samson Raphael Hirsch, conceived of Jewish destiny in universal terms.

"Their (the Israelites) speedy removal from the Land (of Israel) brought about their spiritual and moral salvation... The State and Temple went to ruin, but the people... went out to assume the burdens of their great mission in the Dispersion".

Hermann Cohen brought this rationalist-humanistic trend to its climax, as is evident from the following quotations:

"Man, not the people and not Moses; man, as rational being, is the correlate of the God of revelation".

"The Covenant is the instrument of faithfulness. Therefore, God concludes a covenant with Noah, with Abraham and with Israel".

"God does not love Israel more or differently than His love for men in general... In Israel, God loves Israel only as a model, a symbol of mankind, a mark of distinction within it, for only monotheism is able to establish the unity of the human race".

In his magisterial work, *Jewish Theology*, Kaufmann Kohler, longtime President of the Hebrew Union College, considers the Jewish "trinity" to be not the unity of God, Israel and Torah, but God, Man and the Kingdom of God. He retained his humanistic vision, though he subscribed to some racist ideas. Reflecting the preoccupation with race in the early decades of the twentieth century, he wrote, "In fact, the soul of the Jewish people reveals a peculiar mingling of characteristics, a union of contrasts which make it especially fit for its providential mission in history".

Martin Buber, as is well known, is unclassifiable. At one time, a folkist, a mystic, an interpreter of Hassidism, he moved steadily toward a position "on the boundary", between romanticism and rationalism. In his description of the faith-event in Judaism as a personal "believing in", contrasted with a propositional "believing that", which he attributed to Christianity, he focused attention on the openness of revelation, its transcendence of all knowing. He rejected the legalistic phase of Judaism in order to keep himself open to fresh experiences. He was aware of the danger of reducing religion to a contract, duly signed and delivered. His admiration for Hassidism was due to his "idealization" of their movement, especially in its early phases. He identified with their presumed endeavor to transcend the boundaries of the Law.

Franz Rosenzweig, in keeping with his Hegelian orientation, inter-
interpreted the covenant between God and Israel as a living tradition, rather than as a book or a series of books. The Divine Will is dynamic, consisting of thrusts of redeeming vitality. Revelation is a continuing phenomenon, with bursts of God’s love eliciting new expressions of Israel’s love. Rosenzweig regarded the Christian community as a providential instrument for the realization of the covenant with Israel. In his famous metaphor, the function of Christianity is to convert the world; that of Israel to be faithful to its ideal self. Like the sun, which is unthinkable without its rays, the covenant is inconceivable without both Israel and the Church.

Mordecai M. Kaplan devoted his life to the formulation of a synthesis between Jewish nationalism and humanism. He called for the rejection of the dogma of the “Chosen People”, in the sense of a people set apart and insulated from the life of humanity. To him, the notion of a special covenant with Israel was abhorrent. All nations are called upon to apply to their own life the prophetic teaching of “ethical nationhood.”

We conclude from all the above that the proposition we quoted at the beginning of this essay reflects only one of the several strands composing the Jewish tradition. It articulates the judgment of the fundamentalists, romantics and mystics, certainly not the view of the prophetic-philosophical school, from Abraham to Rosenzweig and from Maimonides to Mordecai Kaplan. I need hardly add that I identify with the philosophical trend in Jewish thought, in the interpretation of the covenant concept. I take the paradigm of the covenant to be Abraham’s rebellion against the practice of sacrificing children rather than “his passing between the pieces” of slaughtered animals. The former was then a revolutionary ideal, the latter was already an archaic way of formalizing a contract. The “Faithful Agreement” of Ezra and Nehemiah is to me a demonstration of the way the Jewish tradition took form—through a series of self-assumed ordinances, or takkanot. All that we do to express our love of God articulates the voice of God within us. So, the rabbis spoke of ordinances that they themselves formulated as “commandments” of the Lord. There were also survivals from the dim past, such as the system of sacrificial offerings. Such archaic practices should be consciously confined to the past, while their inner spirit is cherished as part of the sacred tradition. In this self-renewing and self-critical spirit, the covenant concept remains valid even in our day.
I offer the following propositions as both a personal confession of faith and as a contemporary expression of the prophetic-philosophical school of thought:

1. A covenant establishes a living tradition, whereby the piety of past generations is preserved as the heritage of succeeding generations. It is through the Jewish tradition that I grew up to feel the majesty and the message of God. But it is also the same tradition that encouraged me to study and to appreciate the open horizons of philosophy and the ardor of other faiths. The emphasis on God's transcendence in Judaism kept me from surrendering to the notion that God's Will, in its fullness, is reflected within my tradition exclusively.

2. A lifetime is needed to sense the import of a great historical faith and relate it to contemporary experience. Therefore, we cannot but live within the confines of one tradition. But, divine revelation in all its dimensions is universal and all-human. Hence, we must learn to maintain a vital tension between our subjective feelings, rites and symbols and the objective world, as it is presented to our minds and hearts by the emergent world-wide culture of which we are part.

3. God is the source of all great and ennobling ideals. Our experience of holiness blends harmoniously all ideals and values, even as the mind synthesizes the impressions of the senses. So, revelation is an extension and harmonization of human values, not a rejection of them. If aught is not humanizing, it is not divine. The thrusts of revelation are not those which shatter the structures of human wisdom, but those which extend and enhance the slow and stumbling efforts of mankind. Just as the God we worship is revealed in the marvels of cosmic creation and the daily wonders of life and spirit, rather than in the so called “miracles” which impress the gullible, so the Word of God is revealed primarily in the common experience and tested wisdom of mankind, secondarily in particular cultures.

4. Particular revelations are vehicles of spiritual power, but their specific content is metaphorical. Our finite minds can reflect the Infinite Mind only “through a glass, darkly”, by the utilization of fragments of human experience. Not all metaphors are born equal. They can function as rungs on Jacob's ladder, but also as slippery steps toward the pit of self-righteous illusions. The metaphors of ritual and dogma, in my faith, as in other religious communities, are always more than action-symbols or figures of speech. They are freighted with the memories of the past and
charged with the covenanted loyalty of a living community. As such, they are invaluable, providing we bear in mind their metaphorical character.

5. I repudiate the notion that God “contracted” His Will within the stated precepts of the Jewish tradition, in the same manner as He “contracted” His Infinite Being in order to create this finite universe. This Kabbalistic notion of tsimtsum (contraction) cannot be understood literally. In “contracting” Himself, it is He who does the contracting, at every point. There cannot be aught which escapes His Power, “The whole earth is full of His Glory”. The description of His self-limitation in allowing room for human freedom is intended to suggest the existence of two levels of reality—as seen by man and as seen by God (mitsidenu and mitsido). “Self-contraction” is meaningful only in a metaphorical sense, as “when a father reduces his mind to the level of a small child” when he tells a childish fable or plays childish games. The father’s mind remains incomprehensible to the child, while the world of the child is make-believe to the father.

The doctrine of God’s “self-contraction”, or “withdrawal”, or “eclipse”, seems plausible when it is applied to the reality of human freedom. If humans are truly free, God must have limited His own Power. But, I contend that it is precisely in the free mind of man that God is most manifest. There are situations in life, where the Presence of God is hidden from our sight, and there are window-like areas, which are transparent to His radiance. In all cases, we can only speak of God’s “absence” as a subjective feeling, not as an objective reality. God is everywhere, and He is manifest wherever the “things of God” are realized.

6. When we speak of “the Chosen People” in Judaism, I take the phrase to refer to the ideal Israel, the covenanted people, as in Isaiah’s formulation, “to be a covenanted people, a light to the nations”. We of Israel are called upon to act as an example to other individuals and nations, not as an exception. More is expected from those to whom more was given in history, through no merit of their own. At any one time, a particular person or people may have a treasure of spiritual gifts to share with others. But, no individual or people is permanently and in all ways separated from or uplifted above the rest of mankind.

I consider that the Golden Rule applies to communities as well as to individuals—no community should claim exclusive rights or privileges or a unique cosmic status. We should learn to “understand in love” other faiths as we expect others to understand us in love.
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NOTES

2. Deuteronomy 33, 27.
4. Micah 6, 8.
5. Leviticus 19, 2.
8. B. T. Makkot 23b.
10. 1 Kings 8, 12.
12. Ibid., note 1, p. 45.
18. 2 Kings 11, 17.
19. 2 Kings 23, 2, 3.
22. Isaiah 55, 9.
23. Hosea 6, 17.
24. Amos 3, 2; 9, 7.
27. Isaiah 42, 6; 49, 8.
31. Ibid., XLI, 275.
32. Ibid., XIX, 98.
34. Galatians 3; 2 Corinthians 3, 6.
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36. B. T. Yoma 28b.
38. B. T. Baba Bathra 15b.
41. Acts 5, 38, 39.
42. Acts 23, 9.
43. Abot 4, 11. It is believed Hasandlor means the Alexandrian.
44. B. T. Baba Kama 38a.
46. B. T. Avoda Zara 3b.
47. B. T. Sabbath 88a.
49. Malachi 1, 11.
51. B. T. Gittin 57b.
52. In Maimonides’ formulation of this belief, it is not clear whether “the true faith” of the future will be Judaism or universal religion. *Hilchot Melochim*, XII.
54. B. T. Baba Bathra 15b.
55. Deuteronomy Rabba 8, 6.
56. B. T. Avoda Zara 65a.
57. B. T. Hullin 13b.
58. Letter of Joseph, King of Khazaria, in introduction to Halevi’s *Kuzari*.
60. Ibid., III, 7.
61. Exodus 24, 8.
62. Maimonides’ introduction to the eleventh chapter of Sanhedrin, in his commentary to the *Mishnah*.
69. Exodus, 19, 6.
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72. Ibid., p. 441.
73. Ibid., p. 149.