

*[In 1981 I was invited by the Los Angeles Hillel Council, headed by Rabbi Richard Levy, to serve as “director of religious outreach” among the student population. Although the primary concern of my employers in the L.A. Jewish Federation was the perception that many young Jews were joining “cults” and making undesirable religious choices, the scope of my work rapidly expanded as I became a species of “chaplain at large” to alienated Jews in the wider community. The publication of the following paper, which had its origin in a presentation to the Board of Rabbis, sought to focus attention less on the “villains who were seducing our youth” and more on the inadequacies of our institutions that left them so vulnerable. It was remarkably well received, and generated much valuable debate. Rereading it after 25, I see that I I was often naïve, and had failed to recognize certain major concerns, such as those raised by women; nevertheless I am reprinting it because it is I think, an important “period piece”.]*

## THE NEEDS AND EXPECTATIONS OF THE RELIGIOUSLY ALIENATED JEW

### Introduction

During the last year and a half, while serving as director of religious outreach with the Los Angeles Hillel Council, I have worked closely with more than 200 people, whose ages range from 20 to about 62. The framework of this work was religious counseling, and these people had approached me, or had been referred, with the primary, or at least the explicit goal of discussing their difficulties with Judaism. Incidentally, this work has provided me with a unique opportunity to observe some of the problematic aspects of the Jewish community today. The following remarks are based on many hours of conversations during which I sought to assist people to understand the significance of their own religiosity, and to reconsider Judaism as a meaningful route; during this process I had to listen to their "complaints" about organized Judaism.

My clients did not comprise a homogeneous group, and included representatives of many segments of the Jewish population, from active members of established congregations, through persons who had joined explicitly non-Jewish religious groupings. A few were Orthodox Jews, others "minimally" religious Jews, and yet others were full-fledged members of Christian churches or eastern religious orders. Nevertheless, they all shared two common characteristics:

1. They considered themselves to be religious people;

2. They claimed that they had been unable to find satisfaction for their religious needs within the Jewish institutions they had visited.

These are both subjective statements which I did not for the most part dispute. There is here no intention to apportion blame, not upon "seekers who did not seek at home first," not upon the Jewish educators, and not upon the parents of a whole generation.

Numerically these people may not represent a large percentage of the total number of Jews we are losing through intermarriage, assimilation, etc. Nevertheless, they are very important Jews, for various reasons. Firstly, they represent a major resource for the recruitment of lay religious leadership; I shall return to this issue below, in the discussion of the apparent absence of role models. Second, and this is a somber statement of my own feeling, if we cannot find a place for such people, many of whom are mature, creative individuals, it bodes ill for the survival of the Jews as a religious community. Third, these people cannot be dismissed as an insignificant discontented minority. In fact, they are a kind of seismograph for a much larger part of the community; the issues that they find so pressing are also real but unarticulated concerns for many other Jews. This last point has been confirmed on the occasions on which I have presented my findings to audiences of committed Jews. The degree to which the "insiders" identified with the complaints of the "outsiders" was remarkable.

In listing and cataloging the various complaints, I make no attempt to determine whether or not there are correlations between particular concerns and the different parts of the population with which I worked. This "methodological" omission is conscious and deliberate. Although there are great differences between individual clients, as regards background, maturity, marital status, seriousness of quest, etc., they do nevertheless form a clearly definable group with a significant common characteristic: they are *religiously underprivileged Jews*. They are people who had needs that can be identified as religious, and which were not met by the Jewish community. Thus whether they were troubled late adolescents working out their problems in the form of religious conflict with their families; or observant Jews who had "given up" on their religiosity and had relinquished their sense that there should be something more to being Jewish; or mature

individuals who had spent years in finding a sophisticated religious path outside of Judaism (often with regret and a desire to "return"); in all of these cases, we are dealing with individuals whose Jewish knowledge was so limited that they were unable to find access to the sources and resources of Jewish wisdom when they needed it.

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One of the major difficulties that Jewish educators encounter in working with alienated Jews is language. Questions are frequently formulated in nonJewish terms, which either reflect or express nonJewish conceptualizations of the nature of the Jewish religion. This nonJewish language often creates expectations that cannot be met, and so the questions remain unanswered, and both sides emerge from the conversation frustrated. There are various reasons for this. The most obvious is the dismaying ignorance on the part of so many Jews of the nature of the Jewish religious civilization. But this is an "internal" reason. There are also "external" factors.

The first is the pervasive Christian ambiance in which we live. This has had a profound effect on the way in which Jews see their own religion. This is true on the most elementary level, and also when it comes to more sophisticated discussions. A common example of this is the word "messiah". There is hardly an "uneducated" Jew in America whose understanding of the meaning of the word has not been influenced by Christianity. There are many other examples. Even the definition of our Bible is affected, for in English it is the "Old Testament," a term which implies, and has been used to imply, that there is a newer version that we have rejected. Perhaps one of the most pernicious nonJewish formulations is the one that distorts the entire nature of the Jewish religion: that Judaism is the religion of the Old Testament and that it has not evolved since. It is not surprising that Christian missionaries find it so easy to speak of converts as "completed Jews."

However, it is not only Christianity that has shaped the conceptual framework from which the Jew approaches his religion. In recent years there has been a significant influx of Eastern religions

into the West, some of which are sources of authentic wisdom, whereas others are superficial vulgarizations. But irrespective of their authenticity, they appear to relate to religious needs, and have had a profound impact on religion in the U.S. With their emphasis on the "spiritual" and ideas of personal development and the overcoming of the ego, together with a simplified technology of meditation, they present a real challenge to the "despiritualized" Western religions. Many of their concepts are brought to the Jewish educator in nonJewish language, and as a result are rejected out of hand.

As a result of these and other influences, many Jews have new expectations of what a religion should be, and what it should offer. This is threatening enough to any institutions, but it is exacerbated in our case by the fact that these expectations are, as we noted, formulated in nonJewish language. Now it is clear that Judaism cannot fulfill all of these expectations, nor can we answer all questions in the language in which they are asked. What we can and must do, however, is to attempt to understand the religious needs that lie beneath them. What follows is a listing of the most common expectations that I have heard from my clients, together with an attempt to relate to each in a Jewish fashion.

## The Expectations

1. **Peace of mind.** The most common reason people gave for their disappointment with Judaism was that it fails to offer a path to peace of mind. The forms of peace of mind that were sought varied considerably. At the most moderate end of the scale it was little more than a desire for a place of silence; more radical were requests concerning meditation practices in Judaism. Now it is no secret that most Jewish religious institutions do not offer peace of mind, or even consider it to be their function to provide it. The silence of a church in the early hours of the morning, or the meditative serenity after a Hathi yoga session, are not what one expects to find in Temple or synagogue worship, even on the Sabbath, and most rabbis would deny that they are legitimate expectations. "We live in a troubled world, and we are expected to live out our religious lives while accepting full responsibilities within this world."

Is there then no room within Judaism for those who seek peace of mind? In order to answer this question, we have first to acknowledge the need, to explore its sources, and then proceed to understand how the topic is viewed in Jewish sources. Very briefly, let us say that just as modern society actively cultivates stress and anxiety as motivations for economic activity, so it legitimizes the quest for peace of mind. The five o'clock martini may suffice for some; others find it with their families and with the great variety of leisure activities that are now available. However, there are many who seek it as an integral part of their religious practice. In fact, Judaism does and always has acknowledged this need, but with two important reservations. The first is that peace of mind should not be regarded as a goal in life, but rather a phase through which one passes. The second is that it come about as a result of the resolution, and not the suppression, of conflicts. The peace of mind that Judaism knows is not that of the fundamentalist Christian, with its uncritical certainty and faith, nor is it the mindless state of the bliss seeker. It is clear that the model and the form of peace of mind that Judaism accepts is connected with the Sabbath, especially as it is celebrated in the home. However, we should also take note of the hasidic notion that one should attempt as much as is possible both to draw the Sabbath into the week, and to discover its presence in the profane.

**2. A sense of quest.** The second most frequently voiced complaint is that Judaism is presented as a set of skills and proficiencies that are learned, and not as a path of development. One learns Hebrew to such a level, 'x' prayers, 'y' *mitzvot* and 'z' rituals, and one becomes a Jew of such and such denomination. What is missing, it is claimed, is the idea that truth is not something that one learns once, but that it is gradually revealed, and the extent to which this takes place depends on one's own development. One understands the world only to the extent that one understands oneself. Furthermore, there is an expectation that there should be an established discipline within which this takes place, a path of graded and possible steps. Once again, this is an expectation that can be met in Judaism, and there is extensive, though not readily accessible, literature on the subject.

**3. Occasional direct affirmation that there is something beyond--** and not just in times of crisis. People have come to expect of their religion that it provide the means or the opportunity to know that there really is something beyond, that there is another, metaphysical reality. This desire for occasional direct affirmation or knowledge is not anti-intellectual, though the knowledge that is sought is more intuitive than rational. This kind of affirmation is in the nature of a religious experience. The claim is often made that the synagogue and temple effectively suppress such experience, that it is easier to find God in nature or in music than in worship. Judaism in fact does acknowledge the possibility of such direct ways of knowing God, though it establishes quite firmly the need to be aware of the possibility of self-deception.

**4. Innocence.** We live in a culture of guilt; guilt is what makes us run and succeed (or fail), and it is also one of the mainsprings of capitalism. Ultimately, however, its consequence is that we consider ourselves to be worthless: our value is in what we do or what we produce, not in who we are. This is very much a Christian idea, part of the 'Protestant ethic' that has taken over much of the Jewish world view.

However, today one encounters more and more another vision of the nature of mankind: of innocence, of conscience motivated by love, not by guilt. This is a very attractive and also a seductive idea: that we are ultimately essentially pure, good, loving creatures. In much of the so-called New Age culture this idea is pushed to extremes; furthermore, it possesses nihilistic, and certainly non-monotheistic implications, especially when it is articulated in the statement that "we are as gods." Nevertheless, when we deny this aspect of religion totally, we are impoverished. This is exactly how many people perceive Judaism: as a "dry" religion that denies the divine soul in man, the divinity within us. In truth, Judaism has always existed within a tension between the two poles of guilt and of innocence, but in recent years the pendulum has swung far in the direction of the former. The prayerbook can provide much material to help us rediscover the other alternative. For example, the dawn prayer, "*Elohay, neshamah shenata bi tehorah hi*", "God, the soul that you have given me is pure", is an expression of such an attitude.

**5. A community that is religiously orientated.** There is a strong need for a community in which it

is the norm and not the exception to raise and to discuss both personal and more general religious issues; people want to be able to talk about their doubts, their progress or their lack of it, their ability or inability to pray, to express their angers, and to receive both support and reproof from their fellows. Such a community, of which many examples exist today, enhances one's ability to be a religious person. It is noteworthy that certain cults have recognized this natural and legitimate need and have manipulated and exploited it for their own purposes. The Jewish community is experienced by many as primarily social, and not religious in its nature; and even worse, when a particular grouping does aspire to be religiously orientated, it may appear to others to be a self-glorifying institution.

**6. A total or holistic religion.** In some ways this is identical with the expectation that religion be more serious, that it relate to every aspect of one's being. It is felt that one of the functions of a religion, in this case Judaism, should be to enhance the individual's awareness of the divine in everything he or she does. One is religious not just during prayers and rituals, but also between them. Religion should have something to say about our lives outside the formal side of religion and community. It is strange that Judaism, a religion that is so explicitly in-worldly, should come to be regarded as having no relationship to day-to-day life, but the complaint is serious and meaningful. Two examples can highlight what is meant by this. The first is a comparison of the different expectations we have of religion and psychotherapy. Judaism does not seem to offer us a way in which we can express the darker sides of our life (on the personal level; nationally and historically, we are more than adequate!). When we feel unhappy or unable to cope, we seek therapy, not spiritual guidance. The second example relates to the welfare of one's body. Now it is commonplace that Judaism generally promotes a positive attitude towards one's physical existence. In the Jewish religious world, neither a visit to one's physician nor a physical workout appear to be connected with religion. This latter point is particularly apparent to people who have been involved in the study and practice of Yoga, and who have begun to appreciate this work as spiritual.

Once again, there are Jewish answers to these issues, and it is obvious that some of the blessings can create a natural bond between the apparently separate realms of world and

religion. Nevertheless, problems do remain, and there are no easy answers to some of these expectations.

**7. The place and the role of the ecstatic experience.** It is impossible to deny that some people have ecstatic experiences which are religious in nature. It is the task of the religion to help people to understand these experiences, to know what they mean, what their significance is. This is not a matter of ideology, but more one of personality. Some people are more likely to encounter this experience than others, and when it does occur, they want to anchor it in religion. Many of the people I worked with felt that Judaism had not been able to help them here. Some of the saddest cases I have seen were Orthodox Jews who had unexpectedly known an ecstatic experience, and had subsequently found no way to integrate it into their religious lives. They had no Jewish language, no vocabulary that would make sense of it, and as a result, what could have been an enriching experience became an impoverishing one.

**8. The need for role models.** The lack of role models, of persons who can demonstrate with their being (as opposed to talking or writing about it) how, despite all the difficulties, one can live as a religious person in our times, has been discussed elsewhere. Each individual today, no matter what his or her ideological allegiance, basically has to choose an identity and a path without help. How is one to be a religious Jew in the 1980's? I remember once discussing this with the parents of a young man whom I had assisted in returning from a powerful encounter with Christianity. I suggested that essentially the young man was a deeply religious person. Their response was: "Do you mean he should become a rabbi?" Now of course, there are better ways of expressing one's inner life than by professionalizing it, but they are not readily available in the Jewish world. From my experience over the last 18 months, I have become convinced that precisely those mature people who have come to Judaism after a period of alienation, who have "returned" with highly developed religious wisdom can be of great help here. They exist today in small numbers in our communities, many of them precious hidden lights.

**9. "The significance of my life."** This really is the basic issue. Almost every person with whom I worked felt that Judaism had not helped them to relate to the question of the significance of

their *individual* lives. It should not be inferred from this either that they were escapists, or self-indulgently sought only private satisfaction; in the majority of cases this is simply not true (though it is commonly alleged to be by apologists for the status quo). Most of the people in the population I encountered are "worldly," and some are idealistic. They appreciate and respect the social rights and responsibilities that are delineated by Judaism. Nevertheless, they felt strongly that Judaism seemed to focus all its attention on communal and national issues, and left little for the individual. They acknowledge that the concerns that are addressed are important, that one must ask "What does it mean to be a Jew?" and "What is the meaning of Jewish existence?" But the answers to these questions may mean little if we do not relate to another: "What is the meaning of my life?"

This last issue seems to me to be of critical importance; it probably includes within it all the other problems that I have raised. It is also an issue that Judaism, with its fine balance between the worldly and the unworldly, the physical and the spiritual, can relate to. One of the encouraging signs of our times is that our institutions are beginning to do just that.