

A Matter of Choice: Jewish Identity in the Coming Generation*

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This is the basic choice which Jews will face, in the coming generations, as they did in past ones. Whether to be Yaacov, he who merely follows, or to be Yisrael, he who struggles with God, the unknown, and with his fellow man and woman. Whether to worship the Jewish past without change; or to grapple with the past in order to construct from its elements an improved future, this is the choice. And what we choose shall be our future.

Jewish identity is whatever Jews feel, think and do, as well as what they do not feel, do not think, and do not do. Of these three dimensions probably the most important one is the third: What Jews do and what they don't. To feel Jewish, or to think Jewish, may be significant for the individual Jew; but when feeling and thought do not guide some action, Jewish identity remains confined to the subjective experience. Therefore, let us open this inquiry by outlining some major features of what Jews in the world do today, and what they do not do.

A first outstanding feature is that one generation after the declaration of Israel's independence, the prophecy of the founders of Zionism still remains unfulfilled. What was their prophecy? That the establishment of a Jewish State would solve the Jewish problem.¹ But after thirty years of independence, only three million Jews live in Israel, and ten million live in the Diaspora.² Most Jews live outside Israel as a matter of choice, and for most of them the Jewish problem is no longer the difficulty of coping with the goyim, but the difficulty of coping with Jewish identity itself.

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¹ Theodor Herzl, *Judenstaat* (The State of the Jews), Hebrew translation *Medinat Hayehudim*, Tel Aviv, 1978. Also: Walter Laqueur, *A History of Zionism*, London, 1973.

² The figure of ten million Jews in the Diaspora is based on an estimate by the Israeli demographer, Professor R. Baki. For other estimates, see the current issue of the *American Jewish Yearbook*.

In other words, the early Zionist assumption that the main Jewish problem is anti-Semitism, has for most Jews, become obsolescent. Of course, anti-Semitism still exists, but most Jews no longer perceive it as a major threat to their survival. What threatens Jewish survival today is what happens inside Jews, rather than what happens outside; what Jews do and don't, and not what non-Jews propose to do to them. Nor is this phenomenon confined only to the Diaspora. Even in Israel, where Jewish identity is facilitated by the existence of a predominantly Jewish society, many Jews are asking: apart from living as a Jewish majority in Eretz Yisrael, speaking Hebrew, serving in the Israel Defence Forces and paying taxes to a Jewish State, what does it mean to be Jewish? Is there more to being Jewish than just an existential experience?³

As we enter the second generation after the Holocaust, and the second generation of Israel's independence, we may describe the Jewish problem as having changed from a problem of survival to a problem of identity. Israel was—still is—the answer to the problem of survival. The Law of Return makes Jewish survival possible for any Jew who chooses to survive as a Jew in the only land where Jews are sovereign; the military capability of the Jewish State defends Jewish survival, some-

³ See for example: E. Ben-Ezer (ed.) *Unease in Zion*. New York, 1973; Gershom Scholem *Devarim Bego*. Tel Aviv, 1975; Muki Tsur, *Kutoner Hapasim*. Tel Aviv, 1977. Almost all the issues of *Shdemot*, a periodical published by the Kibbutz movement, deal extensively with the Jewish identity of Israelis.

times even in distant rescue operations, such as at Entebbe. But even in Israel, with the possible coming of peace, the problems of survival and defence may become secondary to those of identity. Of course, in a certain sense, the problem of identity itself is also a problem of survival. For where Jews have lost their Jewish identity, they and their families may no longer survive as Jews.

Perhaps nothing illustrates the current problem better than the analysis of the present patterns of Jewish immigration. Jews emigrate today from the Soviet Union, from Latin America, from South Africa, and from Iran. Now, despite the existence of Israel, despite the approach of peace, the pattern of Jewish immigration resembles that of former generations. No matter where they come from—no matter what Jewish education they have or have not received, most Jews who emigrate—perhaps 75% of them—prefer to go to countries other than Israel. In other words, when Jews are faced with an actual choice between the independent centre of Jewish existence and the non-independent outside, most of them opt for the outside. In concrete terms, this means that when they make this choice, most Jews opt for the conditions in which Jewish identity is more exposed to erosion than in Israel.

These patterns of drifting, or opting, away from the centre of Jewish life is repeated in the attitude of many Jews to Jewish community life. For two thousand years, the two principal frameworks which ensured the survival of Jewish identity were the Jewish community and the Jewish family. There was a close interdependence between the two in matters of education, religious ritual, and mutual help. This is no longer so. Now, in the Diaspora, as many as half of the Jews, possibly more, live outside any organized Jewish life; “unaffiliated” as some may call them. Simultaneously, in the Diaspora, the *Jewish* family is, in a great many cases, losing its coherence, both as a family and as Jewish. In Israel, the problem is as yet far less acute. The family, as a unit, is much stronger in Israel than in most Western societies; but even in Israel, where family links

are quite strong, we are asking ourselves what does it mean to be a *Jewish* family. In Israel, we too, are beginning to be bothered by the weakness of community *frameworks*. The first generation of Israel preoccupied itself mainly with the establishment of State structures: government, army, national projects. Community problems were relegated to the second order. Some say that Israel, because of its small size and the small size of its population, is a community in itself; some call it a city-state or even a shtetl carrying a State on its shoulders. But for many of us such definitions do not suffice. In many parts of Israel, Jewish community frameworks are ineffective, and the link between them and community members is uncertain and sometimes non-existing. There are, of course, exceptions, and the Kibbutz is perhaps the outstanding one. In size and involvement of its members, the Kibbutz is a compact and effective Jewish community; perhaps almost an ideal one. However, Kibbutz population is only 2.6 percent of the population of Israel; and although most Kibbutz members largely identify with their form of community life, many of them begin to be bothered by the question: are we really Jewish, or merely Hebrew speaking farmers? What is our Jewish identity? And how do we express it?

One may perhaps describe the process which is taking place in the Diaspora—and to a far lesser extent in Israel—as a growing polarization. On the one hand, part of the Jews maintain and even reinforce their ties with the centres of Jewish life; the number of such Jews is probably increasing. But on the other hand, the number of Jews who drift away from the centres of Jewish life, and whose Jewish identity is eroding, is also increasing. To put it differently: whereas in the past most Jews probably identified themselves in the “gray” area, somewhere between total commitment to Jewish identity and total withdrawal, today there is increasing movement in both directions, and the “gray” area is gradually vacated. But polarization is probably not symmetrical; and probably more Jews are drifting away from Jewish life than moving

towards its centres. This is probably more true of the Diaspora than of Israel; for in Israel probably a greater proportion of Jews are concerned actively with the expression of Jewish identity—and with its possible meaning, both now and for the coming generation.

Another feature concerning what Jews do is Jewish demography; or to put it bluntly, the diminishing will of the Jewish people to perpetuate themselves. Not only have the Jews not recuperated the loss, in the Holocaust, of six (out of 16 million), but their actual number (thirteen million) is probably declining. Only in Israel does the Jewish community show some rate of natural increase (1.8% annually), although that rate by itself is not sufficient to overcome the far greater rate of Israel's Arab minority (3.7%).⁴ (It is estimated that an average annual immigration rate of about 70,000 will be required in order to maintain the present demographic ratio between Jews (84%) and Arabs (16%) in Israel.)⁵ Elsewhere, the Jewish populations barely remain at their present level, and if some present trends continue, Jewish populations in the United States and Western Europe may substantially decline.⁶ The trend is of course not only a Jewish phenomenon, but typical of many industrialized societies. The probable causes are well known: urbanization, alienation, cultures which are increasingly ego-centered, and the decline of the family.⁷

What characterizes Jewish attitudes towards these processes, in a vast number of instances, is an almost total lack of resistance. Many Jews follow and imitate the general fashions prevalent in the societies in which they live: late marriage, if at all; few children, if at all; and unstable families. Thus, the will to

perpetuate themselves weakens and individuals often become passive consumers of goods and services. The infantile element in character is often emphasized; and the capacity to function as effective heads of family, and as interacting members of a community, inevitably declines.

The next feature we must mention, concerning what Jews do, is that in the next generation more Jews will go to university than in any previous generation. In the Diaspora, probably the greater part of the younger generation will be university graduates; in Israel, though the scope of university education is growing, it will not as yet become an experience of the majority. Preoccupation with learning has always been a central Jewish value; but never before has it been such a widespread phenomenon. And because it has become widespread, the question is whether learning has remained linked with excellence and whether study continues to be a lifetime attitude, or merely a vehicle to achievement. Are degree, rank and professional recognition what matter most? or the quality of learning and the curiosity, the capacity to ask significant questions and to discover new answers?

The last feature we shall describe probably sums up all the previous elements. Among most Jews, Jewish religion continues to decline as a *way of life*. Only a minority of Jews, probably less than 20% still practice religion as an entire way of life.⁸ Among the majority, some may cling to certain ritual aspects of religion, such as Jewish feasts. Theirs is apparently a sentimental or romantic Judaism, and its expression is intermittent. But for what is probably the largest number of Jews, religion has ceased to play any significant role, except perhaps in the rites of passage—circumcision, bar mitzva, wedding, divorce and

⁴ Lecture by the Director General of the Aliya Department, in the Jewish Agency, Mr. Y. Domnitz, on March 21, 1979.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ R. Baki, *op. cit.*

⁷ Council of Jewish Federation, *National Jewish Population Study, Demographic Highlights*. New York, 1977.

⁸ Author's estimate. In Israel, public opinion surveys usually indicate that about 30% of the population answer that they are "religious," about 30% "traditional," and about 40% "secular." However, in "Israel" the proportion of Jews who are either religious or traditional is probably much higher than in the Diaspora.

funeral. For such Jews, these rites often mean going through the motions of ancient tribal customs, because of a perception that somehow "this is expected." But they seldom understand or feel what the rites would signify to a religious Jew, who performs them as an integral part of a complete way of life.

While Jewish religion declines as a way of life, no effective Jewish alternative has been discovered, unless it is connected with Israel. Yet, as we have seen, most Jews do not choose the Israeli way of life; and in Israel itself the possible contents of a non-religious Jewish way of life, is still a largely unresolved problem.

We may sum up, then, five principal issues of Jewish identity, as currently expressed in what Jews do and don't.

First, *that despite its very existence, Israel still does not solve the problems of Jewish identity; certainly not for most Jews in the Diaspora, and to some extent not even for Jews who live in Israel;*

Secondly, *that the Jewish family and the Jewish community are losing in many places their crucial role in maintaining Jewish identity; and where their influence erodes, so does Jewish identity;*

Thirdly, *that the will of Jews to perpetuate themselves has weakened substantially, especially in the Diaspora. In most instances that reflects the way Jews have adopted the norms of behavior prevalent in Western societies, at the price of abandoning traditional patterns (especially as regards the family);*

Fourthly, *that while more Jews than ever pursue academic studies, it is questionable whether many of them still cherish the traditional Jewish attitudes to learning as a value in itself, incessant inquiring as its method, and excellence as the imperative standard;*

And lastly, *that for most Jews, Jewish religion has ceased to be a way of life; and, except in Israel, it has nowhere been successfully replaced by another way of life which is significantly Jewish.*

There are of course many other aspects of

Jewish identity which could also be examined. For example: what is the current role of the Hebrew language among Jews in different places? what is the present significance of Jewish history to different Jews? and what is the influence of the Holocaust on the identity of the younger generation? All these are important questions, and they should be included in any systematic treatment of the problems of Jewish identity. In such a treatment, we could of course describe also aspects of strength in Jewish identity: the existence of Israel as a Jewish society with its throbbing culture; the renaissance of Hebrew and of Jewish studies; the persistence of Jewish communal life in the United States and elsewhere; the vitality of Jewish religious centres; and the sense of community that still pervades most of the Jews when Jewish life is endangered anywhere in the world. However, we have chosen to concentrate on five problems which we consider the most crucial.

No matter how we perceive the problems of Jewish identity, the five major questions which we have described tend to dominate. They overlap and merge together, and their message—both explicit and implicit—is that the Jewish identity of the next generation is fraught with uncertainty. So great is the uncertainty that some experts predict a decline of the American Jewish community from nearly six million at present to two or three million by the end of the century.⁹ Some predictions are even more pessimistic. Similar predictions are made concerning Jews in Europe and in Latin America, where Jewish identity is eroding even faster.

Let us now try to set these present processes within the larger perspectives of Jewish history, so as to try and discover whether the past holds any lessons for us concerning the future.

The Jews have survived as a people for over three thousand and five hundred years. There are few other nations which have survived so long; and fewer yet whose history is so charged

⁹ Private sources.

with achievement and disaster. Survival for more than one hundred generations is in itself a triumph; but the strategies which sought to assure it sometimes culminated in disaster. Suffice to mention the first destruction and exile, the second destruction and exile, and the third destruction—the Holocaust—which was a greater catastrophe than all preceding disasters in Jewish history.

What were the Jewish strategies, which sometimes achieved remarkable success, and sometimes ended in the collapse of entire communities? These were strategies for living, and they operated in at least three dimensions: territory, common frameworks, and a common way of life.¹⁰

The territorial strategies of the Jews have, with many variations, always alternated between two major options: almost all the Jews living in the Land of Israel and almost all the Jews living in dispersion outside the Land of Israel. Each of these two major options ended, sometime, in catastrophes. However, since the collapse of Bar Kochba's rebellion, in the Second Century CE, all the major disasters occurred in the dispersion; if only for the simple reason that between the Second Century and 1948 all major Jewish communities were outside the Land of Israel. Paradoxically, while dispersion made particular Jewish communities vulnerable to destruction, it made the destruction of all the Jews practically impossible. The most thoroughly planned murder of the Jews attained one third of the Jewish people; two thirds were dispersed beyond the reach of the Nazi murderers.¹¹

Territorial strategies were sometimes pronounced by Jewish leaders, as for example when Herzl defined the aims of Zionism. But in practice a strategy was the result of a vast accumulation of decisions by individual Jews and Jewish families. Thus Jews who, during the second half of the 19th Century decided to

leave Europe for America or for Eretz Yisrael, thereby devised, unknowingly, a strategy of survival for their children and grandchildren. Of those who remained in Europe, two thirds were murdered in the Holocaust.

Today the territorial strategy of the Jewish people remains dispersion, and no single Jewish community constitutes a majority among the Jews; nor is any Jewish community likely to become a majority within the next generation.

Jewish territorial strategy, in the future, will therefore depend on the accumulated decisions of millions of Jews: to stay where they are? to immigrate to another country? and if so, should that country be Israel? We cannot predict the decisions of Jews one, two and three decades from hence, for the simple reason that we cannot forecast the two crucial factors which will influence their decisions: the conditions in the countries of their dispersal and the contents of their Jewish identity. Our conjectures on conditions in the countries of dispersal may range from a new global upheaval, which some say is bound to come, to a new era of stability, which others say is long due after a century of upheavals. Upheavals may force upon Jews a renewed consciousness of their Jewishness, but should we depend on external forces for the revival of Jewish identity? On the other hand, stability may foster the conditions for a further erosion of Jewish identity in all countries of their dispersion, except Israel. Even in Israel, should peace prove stable, it may reinforce an urge, already manifest among many young Israelis, "to be a people like any other people."¹²

While any territorial strategy cannot suffice, by itself, to preserve Jewish identity, dispersion may itself be an insurance against all-out genocide. In an age of nuclear weapons, the very dispersion of Jews appears to give them a better chance of survival than

¹⁰ Y. Kaufman, *Gola Venechar*. Tel Aviv, third printing, 1962.

¹¹ G. Reitlinger, *The Final Solution*. London, 1968; *Shoat Yehudei Eropa*. Jerusalem, 1973.

¹² Answers, unpublished yet, to questionnaire distributed by the Van Leer Jerusalem Foundation 1978-79.

some other nations of equal size. For Israel, in a Middle East where nuclear proliferation is expected by the mid-eighties, the dispersion of the Jews may acquire the dimension of strategic depth. However, strategic depth can become meaningful only if Jewish identity in Israel will be complemented by an equally strong Jewish identity in the Diaspora.

The second dimension in which Jewish strategies of living operated has been that of common frameworks. The most significant frameworks for the preservation of Jewish identity have been continuously the family and the community and, intermittently, the State and the Temple. Intermittently, because Jews have lived for long periods, even in Eretz Yisrael, without a State, and without a Temple; but Jewish identity could not endure for long without a family and a community to cherish a Jewish way of life.¹³

For many centuries, the Jewish community was a powerful framework in assuring the continuity of a Jewish way of life. Jewish communities enjoyed a great deal of autonomy; and being rid of the burden of state affairs, which remained the privilege of non-Jews, they could concentrate on their way of life. The price was defenselessness, persecution, exile, and Holocaust. The other force which kept Jewish communities together was the intolerance with which the surrounding society treated them. When intolerance subsided, it was as though a barrier had disappeared between Jews and Gentiles, and with its removal the Jewish community lost much of its authority over its members. Jews could drift from the community, without having to convert to another religion, and yet without being rejected either by Jews or by the non-Jews.¹⁴ Only in Israel has Jewish authority reasserted itself in a Jewish community that is politically sovereign and where the sense of belonging precludes a massive

drifting away. True, Israel has its *Yordim*, about a quarter of million, who have wandered away to foreign countries, yet retained in most cases their Israeli nationality. But the very name, *Yored*, one who descends, and the negative connotations this term carries for most Israelis probably have no parallel in the attitude of affiliated Jews in the Diaspora to the unaffiliated Jew. But in a certain sense, the unaffiliated Jew is also a *Yored*; he has, so to speak, "descended" from the community; he has left a Jewish way of life, to seek satisfaction in alien ways.

Preservation of the common frameworks of community and family can thus no longer be prescribed as an adequate strategy, without adding the question about the way of life. If Jewish families fall apart, if Jews drift away from Jewish communities, this is probably because many have ceased to discover in both frameworks an effective meaning of what it is to live as Jews.

Thus, if we are to single out the most crucial question, concerning Jewish identity in the coming generation, we may sum it up as follows: Can we evolve a Jewish way of life which will be meaningful to the next generation? Or shall we remain bound to the old patterns, which are losing us increasing numbers of Jews? The question is less acute in Israel than in the Diaspora; but in Israel too we cannot avoid asking ourselves whether living in a Jewish state is all there is to a Jewish way of life; or whether implicit in the establishment of a Jewish state was the quest to make it a sovereign framework for the discovery and testing of Jewish ways of life in the coming generations.

The Jewish way of life, as a strategy for living, has never been a fixed set of rules, which Jews were commanded to idolize and to abstain from changing. The way of life of the early Hebrews was different from that of the Twelve Tribes; the way Jews lived during the period of the First Temple was not the same as in the Babylonian exile; Jewish practices during the period of the Second Temple became again quite different, and after the destruction of the

¹³ Yaacov Katz, *Tradition and Crisis* (Hebrew) 2nd edition. Jerusalem, 1963.

¹⁴ *Anti-Semitism*, Israel Pocket Library, Jerusalem, 1974.

Temple once again succeeding generations made considerable changes. Each generation chose elements from the Jewish past, and re-combined them in a way which was expected to answer the problems of current reality. Perhaps the best illustration of the process of change is the *Aggadah* about Moses, to whom God made it possible to visit Rabbi Akiba's *Beit Midrash* (Study House). About fifteen centuries separate Moses and Akiba. The *Aggadah* tells us that "Moses sat at the eighth row and *did not understand what they were saying*. He felt feeble. When Rabbi Akiba reached a certain matter, his pupils asked him: 'rabbi, wherefrom do you take this?' He told them: 'this is a Halacha (doctrine) of Moses at Sinai.' Moses felt better." The message of this *Aggadah* is simple. Even Moses, whose Torah became holy to succeeding generations, did not understand Jewish concepts, which by the time of Akiba had developed beyond his grasp. Yet Akiba recognized that the concepts had originated with Moses.¹⁵

The right to re-interpret ancient sources so as to answer the challenges of present reality has been exercised by many Jewish spiritual leaders. Re-interpretation allowed them, among other things, to *change the order of priorities* in the Jewish way of life. The prophet Hosea says: "For I desired mercy and not sacrifice; and the knowledge of God more than burnt offerings."¹⁶ The Book of *Proverbs* says: "To do justice and judgement is more acceptable to the Lord than sacrifices."¹⁷ The *Talmud* says: "The saving of a life (*pikuah nefesh*) postpones Sabbath."¹⁸ All these are re-interpretations concerning the need to change priorities. For the Prophets social justice is a more urgent need than the rituals at the Temple; in the *Talmud*, the saving of a human life is more important than the holiness of the Sabbath. Changing the order of priorities does not mean a denial of

any element in Judaism. Judaism does not evolve by denying its past; it evolves by re-interpretation, re-combination, and changing the order or priorities. Perhaps this is one of the reasons why Rabbi Yitzhak Luria, Haari, the great mystic who lived in Safad in the sixteenth century, could pronounce that "the Torah has six hundred thousand faces—one for each of the sons of Israel who were present at Mount Sinai."¹⁹ This is essentially a pluralistic view of Judaism, and its implicit message is that each Jew must not be a passive vehicle of Judaism, but an active interpreter who constructs his own personal Jewish way of life.

If we accept this pluralistic view, then each of the great works in Judaism, such as Maimonides' *Mishneh Torah*, or Karo's *Shulkhan Aruch*, is only one possible interpretation out of many; perhaps an outstanding one, but never final, neither in authority, nor in the ordering of priorities.

We cannot predict what will happen to Jewish identity in the next generation; but we can at least try to indicate what will be the central issues which may determine its contents. In our view, the central issues should be concerned, once again, with *the changing of priorities*, so that Jewish identity can better cope with changing realities. Failure to change priorities may result in further erosion and perhaps even disaster. Success in establishing new priorities and testing them may result in a renaissance of Jewish identity. Our problem, then, is to determine what are the central issues concerning which Jews should reexamine priorities, and subsequently make decisions which will result in a change of attitudes and a change of patterns of behaviour.

The first issue concerns the priorities between Judaism as an establishment and Judaism as social behaviour. This is an ancient tension in Judaism; probably its earliest expression is the conflict between Prophets, on the one hand, and Kings and Priests on the other hand. For the latter, State and Temple

¹⁵ *Menahot*, 29.

¹⁶ *Hosea*, 6,6.

¹⁷ *Proverbs* 21, 3.

¹⁸ *Shabbath*, 132.

¹⁹ *Yoma*, 9.

are the highest priority; for the former, human relations and social justice. In a later period, the tensions appear again, when the Sages ask why the First and Second Temples were destroyed and give answers that dealt with behavioural and not political causes. "Why was the First Temple destroyed? Because of idolatry, bloodshed and incest." One hundred years before the destruction of the Second Temple, Hillel the Elder, when asked to do so, summarized all the Torah in one sentence: "Do not do unto your fellow man what is hateful to yourself; the rest is interpretation, go and study."²⁰ One century later, the Sages said the Second Temple was destroyed because of "vain hatred"—*sinaat hinam*—thereby indicating that the principle which Hillel had given priority had not been observed. Other Sages said the destruction was caused by an application of the law which was too strict; *mishum shelo avdu lifnim mishurat hadin*, thereby possibly indicating that formal law had become the highest priority instead of Hillel's principle.²¹

Today the same tension recurs. What should we give priority in Israel and the Diaspora? State and Temple? Or social behaviour of Jews? Unlike what many of us think, this is not a tension between religious and non-religious Jews, but between two different groups.

On the one hand, there are Jews for whom the highest priority is the maintenance of the large frameworks of Jewish existence and their attendant rituals: the State of Israel, Jewish and Zionist organizations, and rabbinical institutions. For all these frameworks, the continuity of their existing rituals is the top priority. Rituals are not confined to the religious establishment only. There are State of Israel rituals, and Zionist rituals, and the rituals of Jewish organizations. All these rituals focus around accepted and admired symbols, and many of them consist of one or other modes of sacrifice. In Israel, one mode

of sacrifice is the years of service one gives to the State; sometimes even the sacrifice of one's life in defense of the State. In the Diaspora, the most prevalent form of sacrifice is money donations.²²

On the other hand, there are Jews for whom the highest priority is to improve human relations. For them, "love thy neighbour" is not only a subjective feeling, but mainly a responsibility to help your fellow man and woman solve their problems. For such Jews the main issue is the conception of the Jewish person and his attitude to the society in which he lives. Is a Jew a self centered consumer of services, who pays back by occasional sacrifices, mainly of money? Or is a Jew a person who is concerned about others no less than about himself? And if so, what does such concern mean in terms of effective involvement? in a family? in the community? and beyond?²³

The tension between these two attitudes is not a tension between religious and non-religious Jews; nor is this a conflict about denying, or dismantling, parts of Judaism. Most Jews in both groups are positive about the need for established institutions, and about the need for improved human relations. The real debate is about the priorities. What shall we make central in our Jewish experience: State and Temple? or man and society? The debate is equally necessary both in Israel and in the Diaspora; although, in each, the realities may be somewhat or quite different.

Thus, the first decision we must make concerning Jewish identity in the next generation is about the priorities between State and Temple, on the one hand, and human relations, on the other hand. In other words, what precedes what in Jewish identity: state, rabbinical, and institutional activities? Or the social behaviour of Jews? And if social Jewish behaviour means something, what will be the

²² Interim report on the questionnaire on the Jewish character of Israel, Van Leer Jerusalem Foundation, 1979.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Shabbath*, 31.

²¹ *Bava Matsia*, 30.

principal values which guide it? Many Jews know how to be a good Jew in war, on the Sabbath, in the synagogue, or while performing a Jewish ritual. But most of life is neither war, nor Sabbath, nor in synagogue, nor the performance of rituals. What then is Jewish behaviour on ordinary weekdays? in the street? at work? in the market? at the office? in the army? in leisure time? If we put such questions as a first priority, in both Israel and the Diaspora, we may find them a common concern for both religious and non-religious Jews. Common, because they deal with issues which belong mostly to the secular (*hol*) and not the sacred (*kodesh*) domain of life. A common concern may eventually lead us to discover answers in common.

The next issue which we should discuss as a matter of priority in Jewish identity also evolves from an ancient tension. At the core of the monotheistic faith there are two basic attitudes to experience, between which incessant tension exists. One attitude requires man to direct his life from the inside he knows towards the unknown that transcends his own experience; the other attitude requires that the quest of the unknown should never be relieved by the idolization of anything which man knows or makes, whether tool or concept. To be a Jew, then, is to seek the unknown incessantly; and to struggle incessantly against any idols which block man's discovery of the unknown.²⁴

This is an ancient tension, yet most Jews have let it subside, falsely believing that it is no longer relevant to present reality. The quest of the unknown is not necessarily a religious quest. This is why one of the most crucial decisions a Jew must make concerns his attitude towards God, the unknown. Should our relation to God, the unknown, be a fixed unchanging relation which we inherited from past generations? The danger of such a

²⁴ For a possible secular interpretation of this division, see Alouph Hareven, "A Secular Midrash," in *Forum*, Autumn 1978, Jerusalem.

relationship is that the attitude towards the unknown might become an idol worship; worship of what past generations taught us, and not a quest of our own. As the great hasidic leader, Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Kotsk said: "The difference between the Hasid and the *mitnaged* (opponent)—the Hasid is in awe of the Blessed One, and the *mitnaged* is in awe of the *Shulkhan Aruch*."²⁵

The awe of God, if we are to give it a secular interpretation, is the awe of the unknown that transcends our understanding; the unknown that incessantly changes and re-creates the world we know and our concepts about the world. To borrow an expression from Rabbi Soloveitchik, the purpose of the confrontation between God and man is didactic. If we may interpret Soloveitchik's phrase, the purpose of the "knowledge of God," the unknown, is *to learn incessantly in order to try and perfect the world (tikun haolam)*.²⁶ No man can improve the world unless he is prepared to change; and the beginning of change is inside man himself; in the attitudes and perceptions which operate *inside him*. This is one direction of the monotheist tension.

The other direction, concerning which we must make decisions, is our attitude towards idolatry. Judaism began with the total uncompromising rejection of all idol worship. There were Jewish spiritual leaders for whom opposition to idol worship was equal to the performance of all the other *mitsvot* (commandments). But, as the generations proceeded, apparently most Jews came to believe that the urge to worship idols had long ago been vanquished. One day this will perhaps be considered as one of the great errors in the evolution of Judaism. What caused the error is the simplistic perception that whoever refrains from the worship of stone and wooden idols

²⁵ On opposition to idolatry as a crucial principle in Judaism see Y. Kauffman, *Toldot Haemuna Hayisraelit*, sixth printing. Tel Aviv, 1964; also by the same author, *Gola Venechar*, *op. cit.*

²⁶ Rabbi D.Y. Soloveitchik, *Ish Haemuna*. Jerusalem, 1975.

thereby fulfils the second commandment. However, stone and wooden idols are only few of the infinite forms of idolatry, which in every generation assumes new forms and abandons old ones. What is idolatry? It can be a concept, a symbol, a mental block inside man, which are more difficult to identify and uproot than any stone and wooden form. Idolatry is the worship and attribution of omnipotent qualities to what man invents, whether tools or ideas; the exaggerated, disproportionate concern with the reality that exists beyond that symbol. What is the rejection of idolatry? To know that whatever man thinks, feels, does, makes, says and writes is not omnipotent, is not absolute, is not immune from mistakes, and can be improved.²⁷

We live today in a civilization that can be described as suffused with idolatrous practices. This is a man-centred idolatry, with man as an object and consumer of its rituals. We need a novel, up-to-date, method to identify idolatry in all its ancient and modern forms: the idolatry of product consumption, of sex, of a leader, of a thinker and of his thought, of an entertainer. All these are aspects of idolatrous rituals, of which many of us are seldom aware, because of a significant feature of idolatry is that its practitioners do not realize that they are practicing idolatry. We thus live in a civilization in which idolatry still proliferates, and the frontier between its practitioners and its opponents does not run between religious and non-religious Jews; it runs inside the two groups.

The first two commandments concern God, who transcends what man knows, and the rejection of idolatry, which is a refusal to worship what man knows. The decision required of us, in the next generation, is whether we can restore these two commandments to a priority of deed and not merely of ritual assent; a priority by which they will

²⁷ A. Rakess, "Haaravim Beyisrael uvagada Hamaaravit," in, A. Hareven (ed.), *Bein Milhama Lehesderim*. Tel Aviv, 1977.

acquire an effective, didactic, meaning in our lives today, and not remain a repetition of fixed meanings inherited from the past, a repetition which itself can become an idolatry. Because the next generation of Jews will devote more time and effort to higher studies, these questions may have to become central in their experience. The monotheist tension is essentially a tension about man's way of knowing. Jewish students and scholars will have to decide if they choose to make this tension the guiding force of their learning.

The third major issue which concerns Jewish identity in the next generation, and the last in this lecture, deals with the relations between the majority and the minority in the societies in which Jews live. The issue is crucial, because, as Jews we now experience both sides of the problem. In the Diaspora, Jews continue to be the minority. In Israel, we are the majority and we face extremely difficult choices concerning our attitudes towards the Arab minority. Israeli Arabs are today 16% of the population; most of them were born Israelis, educated in Israeli schools, and speak Hebrew. By the year 2000, there will be one million Israeli Arabs.²⁸ Yet today they are less than 5% of the Knesset members; there is no Arab minister; no Arab Professor; no Arab director of a big business. There may be some good excuses why this is so, most of them in connection with the Arab-Israeli conflict. But if peace comes, do we wish Israeli Arabs, who are 16% of all Israelis to achieve what American society allows the Jewish minority, which is less than 3%?

Whatever we decide will reflect on the Jewish character of Israel. Therefore, the debate preceding any decision must concentrate on what we, as Jews, consider to be the right relations between a majority and a minority. Perhaps one Jewish approach to the problem is that one possible role of the

²⁸ Israeli Population is expected to reach 5 million by 1992, of whom 820,000 will be Israeli Arabs (Plan for a geographical distribution of a five million population, Jerusalem, 1972).

minority, anywhere, is to prevent the majority from idolizing itself. It is as though the minority were telling the majority: "You, the majority, are not the entire world; there are apart from you some others too, and they are different from you." How does one live in a world where one is not the entire world; whether as a majority, or as a minority? that is a major issue with which, we suggest, Jewish identity should be concerned.

We thus have three major problems, which Jews can debate as major issues affecting Jewish identity in the future:

The problem of Jewish social behaviour; and whether, in the next generation, coping with questions of what is Jewish social behaviour, should become a priority over the problems of State and Temple;

The problem of the ancient tension between the quest of the unknown and the opposition of idolatry; and whether that ancient tension, expressed in the first two commandments, can be re-interpreted so as to become a guiding principle for Jewish attitudes in our modern world.

The problem of relations between the majority and the minority in societies where Jews live; as a minority in the Diaspora; and as a majority in Israel; and what should be the guiding principles in both cases.

Of course these three major issues are not the only ones which will determine Jewish identity in the future. Other Jews may think differently, or may suggest that other problems deserve a higher priority. These questions of priorities should be debated across the entire Jewish people, both in Israel and the Diaspora. The importance of such a debate is that it should oblige all of us to grapple with elements in Jewish identity, which we take so much for granted that we almost turn them into an object of idolatry; and with other elements that we have almost totally forgotten.

Whether the three major problems we have indicated will indeed become the highest priority, is not for us to predict. All that we wish to suggest is that they too should contend in the Jewish debate over priorities. We

consider those three issues important, because all of them are common to all Jews, both in Israel and the Diaspora; and because all of them cut across existing barriers between religious and non-religious Jews. From our point of view, the religious-secular problem is already, to a large extent, a phoney problem. It is phoney because most Jews have already opted out of the traditional practice of religion, and there is little chance that most of them will return to the old ways of life. The phenomenon of *baalei teshuva*, those who return to the fold of religion, for all the intensity which its participants experience, is a marginal one.²⁹ The majority of Jews need a new approach to the problem of identity; an approach that will help them re-interpret ancient elements of Judaism, in a way that can help them confront the problems of their own generation.

Our generation is entitled to such a reinterpretation no less than previous ones. The process of interpretation which began with the generations of the Patriarchs and of the Exodus, which was continued by the Prophets and by the Sages, and later by the Rabbis and by secular leaders; this process must be continued by us, in the generations which follow the Holocaust, the atom bomb, the new independence of Israel, the first space flights and the first peace between Israel and an Arab nation. To choose not to reinterpret Jewish identity is to abandon a right exercised by Jews during one hundred generations of Jewish existence; those who abandon this right either become passive worshippers of the past or let lapse their Jewish identity.

The Hebrew phrase *am behira* means "people of the choice;" not, as has been wrongly translated, "chosen people." *Am behira* means people who must make a conscious choice. That, in effect, is the ancient interpretation of the name of our forefather.³⁰

²⁹ See Dr. Janet Aviad, "Interim Report on a Research Project on Baalei Teshuva in Israel," Van Leer Jerusalem Foundation, 1979.

³⁰ *Genesis*, 32, 29.

He was born Yaacov, which in Hebrew means he who follows in the footsteps of another; he who follows suit, who reacts. One day Yaacov grapples with a man, who changes his name to Yisrael; he who "struggles with God and with man and prevails." This is the basic choice which Jews will face, in the coming generations, as they did in past ones. Whether to be

Yaacov, he who merely follows, or to be Yisrael, he who struggles with God, the unknown, and with his fellow man and woman. Whether to worship the Jewish past without change; or to grapple with the past in order to construct from its elements an improved future; this is the choice. And what we choose shall be our future.