

The Modern Jew and the Human Condition: The Impact of Tradition and Secularism*

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The author makes the case that through the observance of a traditional Jewish life style people can achieve a sense of relevance in their lives, learn to accept limitations on their impulses and contribute to social and cultural enrichment. The net effect is, therefore, not that the requirements of the tradition are constraining, but rather expansive.

A feeling of irrelevance is one of the most pervasive emotions in the United States today. It is intimately connected with the individualism, narcissism, and self-realization that critics find handy targets to blame for the ills of society. It is my belief that individualism and narcissism are defenses against the latent depression and lack of self-esteem that are fostered by many aspects of society, and that self-realization is a conscious search for ways to counteract feelings of powerlessness and irrelevance!¹

This article explores some of the causes of the feeling of irrelevance as they occur in socio-cultural contexts, conditioned by the psychological nature of the individual, and from a Jewish philosophical perspective. Proposals will be offered for counteracting the pervasive influences of individualism and narcissism as threats to Jewish communal continuity.**

Peter Berger's conceptualization of the division of social life into public and private spheres serves as an appropriate vehicle for understanding some of the origins and dynamics of the phenomena of individualism

and narcissism.² The public sphere is represented by large bureaucracies and institutions; the private sphere is contained in the family, church, neighborhood, voluntary associations, and subculture. The private sphere was encouraged by the Industrial Revolution due to people's inability to find personal fulfillment through their work. The search for identity could not be resolved in the public sphere—the work place—which fostered alienation. Identity was to be sought and found in the private sphere, primarily in one's family.

The private sphere, though, has not materialized as the secure place for identity-seeking. Its underinstitutionalization, in comparison with the overly structured work place, creates a sense of normlessness and insecurity. The individual is faced with the possibility of alienation in the public sphere and anomie in the private sphere.

The privatization of identity fosters psychological difficulties. The individual who seeks to discover his real self in the private sphere must do so with only tenuous and limited identity-confirming processes to assist him. The family is the principal agency for the

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¹ Beatrice Simcox Reiner, "A Feeling of Irrelevance: The Effects of a Nonsupportive Society," *Social Casework*, Vol. 60, No. 1 (January 1979), p. 3.

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² Peter L. Berger, *Facing Up to Modernity: Excursions in Society, Politics, and Religion*. (New York: Basic Books, 1977), pp. 130-141. A discussion of these concepts and their application to Jewish traditional social structures and social work methodologies can be found in Norman Linzer, *The Nature of Man in Judaism and Social Work*. (New York: Federation of Jewish Philanthropies, 1978), pp. 136-161.

definition and maintenance of private identity, but it alone is insufficient. What Berger calls "institutionalized psychologism," the proliferation of therapies and self-improvement measures, appears as one of the agencies that supply a population of anxious consumers with a variety of services for the construction, maintenance, and repair of identities.³

One of the expressions of identity anxiety and a form of "institutionalized psychologism" has been termed the "new narcissism." It is defined as a "trend toward the deification of the isolated self,"⁴ enacted through various therapies and memberships in religious and social cults. It reflects the increased privatism that seems to prevail even among people who have been active in social causes.

The turn inward appears to be linked not only to the impersonality of bureaucratic structures which foster alienation, but in response to emotional factors: a sense of inner emptiness, fantasies of omnipotence, and avoidance of close relationships that might release feelings of rage. Narcissism serves as a defense against these debilitating attacks on one's self-esteem.

The loss of self-esteem and exacerbation of narcissism constitute a regression to early childhood. Freud described primary narcissism as the natural state of the infant and the source of health self-esteem later on in life. Adler posited that what man needs most is to feel secure in his self-esteem. When natural narcissism is combined with the basic need for self-esteem, a creature is created who has to feel that he is an object of primary value, first in the universe, representing in himself all of life. Man must stand out, be a hero, make a contribution to the world, and show that he counts more than anything or anyone else. Man's selfishness, therefore, is an essential part of his nature. It is at the heart of the urge to heroism, according to Ernest Becker, which

takes different forms such as building an edifice that reflects human value: a temple, a skyscraper, a family that spans three generations. Man's hope and belief is that the things that he creates in society will be of lasting worth and meaning, that they will outlive death and decay, that man and his products count. He must believe that his activities are timeless and meaningful.⁵

Becker's description of the hero is akin to Rabbi Soloveitchik's depiction of Adam I, the human type whose divine mandate spurs him to use all his intellectual endowments to create and produce a society. Adam I's social relationships are functionally oriented toward this goal.⁶ His aim is to become a hero whose monuments will be everlasting and will reflect upon his greatness and majesty.

In addition to the drive for the expression of self-worth, the hero is motivated by his fear of death. Heroism is a reflex of the terror of death. We tend to admire most the courage to face death; it moves us deeply because we have doubts about how brave we ourselves would be. The consciousness of death impels us to quantify time and spatialize it because of its comparative brevity. The individual's urge to produce in his limited lifetime is a major force for the creative gesture. It also serves as a primary source of anxiety over the fear of failure.

The would-be hero must get in touch with his deepest individuality in order to accomplish his task in life. Individuality, in Lichtenstein's view, has three components: singularity, difference and solitariness. As a singular being, the individual constitutes a separate entity that cannot be subdivided nor be lumped together as part of a mass. Singularity is a physical and biological fact but

⁵ Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death*. (New York: The Free Press, 1973), p. 5. Becker's entire book deals with these themes, some of which are explored throughout this article.

⁶ Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, "The Lonely Man of Faith," *Tradition*, Vol. 7, No. 2 (Summer 1965), pp.3-65.

³ Peter Berger, *Ibid*, p. 32.

⁴ Peter Marin, quoted in Beatrice Reiner, *op. cit.*, p.5.

true of the ethical sphere too. Human singularity reflects divine singularity. Difference implies that the individual is not only distinct but distinctive, not only singular but unique. This is true of the individual's physiognomy as well as his character. Individual existence implies a dimension of solitariness or loneliness. Though religion implies a major communal component, it is equally clear that the personal element is no less important. Man's capacity for solitariness is essential for the religious life.⁷

The existential trait of solitariness or loneliness is the sine qua non for the creative gesture. In contrast to social man, lonely man is profound and original. He is courageous. The awareness of loneliness is the root of heroic defiance.⁸ It is also at the root of the existential crisis that confronts man, whether to attempt to overcome loneliness in flight from oneself, in escape mechanisms of aesthetic hedonism and adult narcissism, or to choose to live with one's loneliness and channel it into heroic acts of social and cultural betterment.

An Alternative to Narcissism

Loneliness, as an integral component of individuality, need not inevitably lead to narcissism. It can foster a search for creativity and redemption. Creativity originates within the person; redemption from without. Creativity implies self-assertion, an act of productive originality; redemption requires self-negation. Redemption can only come when we admit our creatureliness and helplessness. The hardest thing for man to achieve is the renunciation of the world and himself. It contradicts his drive for the heroic, for making an indelible impression on the world. The question is, how can man be creative and

achieve redemption simultaneously? Ernest Becker grappled with this question.

The real problem of genius: how to develop a creative work with the full force of one's passion, a work that saves one's soul, and at the same time, to renounce that very work because it cannot by itself give salvation. In the creative genius we see the need to combine the most intensive Eros of self-expression with the most complete Agape of self-surrender. It is almost too much to ask of men that they continue to experience fully both these intensities of ontological striving.⁹

Becker asserts that religion is the only means for resolving this paradox of the human condition. Religion enables man to expand himself as an individual heroic personality and to surrender his existence to a higher being. Religion takes man's creatureliness and his insignificance and makes them a condition of hope. The full transcendence of the human condition means limitless possibilities.¹⁰

In Judaism, Rabbi Soloveitchik has enunciated this idea as the essence of the religious experience of *Halachic* man and woman. In his view, the *Torah* wants man to act heroically, to drive forward toward conquest and victory and when they are within reach, to stop short, turn around, and retreat. At the most exalted moment of triumph man must forego the ecstasy of victory and take defeat at his own hands. This dialectical movement applies to all aspects of man's experience: the aesthetic, the emotional, the intellectual, and the moral-religious. "In a word, the *Halachah* teaches man how to conquer and how to lose, how to seize initiative and how to renounce, how to succeed, how to invite defeat, and how to resume the striving for victory."¹¹

How does the *Halachah* do this? By offering the Jew a model of behavior through the *mitzvot* that encourages him to expand his horizons, tap the earth's natural resources and build a society within a circumscribed structure

⁷ Aaron Lichtenstein, "Individuality and Individualism: a Jewish Perspective." Address delivered at Stern College on March 21, 1979.

⁸ Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, "The Community," *Tradition*, Vol. 17, No. 2 (Spring 1978), p. 44.

⁹ Ernest Becker, *op. cit.*, p. 173.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 204.

¹¹ Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, "Catharsis," *Tradition*, Vol. 17, No. 2 (Spring 1978), p. 44.

of action. The freedom that is granted man to create and to build is vouchsafed with limitations. Two notable examples are: the Sabbath day of rest after a six-day work week, which requires man to withdraw from the pursuit of heroism and acknowledge his limitations as a creative being; and the abstinence from conjugal relations during the wife's menstrual cycle, the *niddah* period, when the couple must withdraw from physical contact, though they passionately yearn for each other.¹²

These kinds of dialectical disciplines extend to all areas of natural drive and temptation. When it is *Halachically* wrong, the hungry person must forego the pleasure of taking food, no matter how strong the temptation; men of property must forego the pleasure of acquisition.

Man's inner life must also be controlled. Laws such as "thou shalt not covet" and "thou shalt not hate thy brother in thy heart" are as integral a part of the *Halachic* normative system as are those related to human external action. The *Torah* believes man to be master over his own inner world.

At this point it is essential to clarify the relationship between the ideas of Becker and Rabbi Soloveitchik. There appears to be an uncanny similarity in their overall perspectives, albeit a fundamental difference. Both Becker and the Rav* view man's search for heroism as the motivating force for his actions. Man wants to be somebody and to give meaning to his life by leaving an impression on this society and culture. While Becker may derive this drive from sources in the psyche and the Rav from metaphysical or divine origins, they posit it as the most compelling force in human nature.

One of the problems with the heroic impulse is the possibility of its unbridled gratification. A person could be so driven by his need for

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 45-46.

* The term "Rav" which means rabbi or teacher is usually used as a substitute for the full name when referring to great scholars. Rabbi Soloveitchik is referred to by this term.

self-expression that it becomes unbounded and then takes other forms such as the pursuit of pleasure. The new narcissism is a distorted response to the drive for heroism. For true heroism has always been fulfilled in a social context: one is courageous in battle, one raises a family, one builds a synagogue for communal worship, and so on. The hero wants to make an everlasting contribution to society; the narcissist is preoccupied with self-gratification, as a defense against his inability to act heroically for the public welfare.

The paradox of the hero's existence is also inimical to the new narcissist's paramount reality. The true hero, according to the Rav, is one who can experience defeat gracefully, who can accept his limitations and thereby gain a redemptive existence. Becker, too, posits the act of withdrawal and the admission of helplessness in relation to a higher Power (citing Rank as the proponent of this idea) as the only possibility for human redemption and ontological meaning. Modern man cannot accept defeat. He does not know the meaning of surrender to God as the higher power, though the bureaucratic ethos demands subservience to superiors in the organizational hierarchy. He does not make a connection between surrender to God and subservience to man. The Adam II type, which the Rav equates with the lonely man of faith,¹³ is a stranger to modern man because the notions of defeat and surrender represent man's ultimate mortality; they spell weakness and helplessness and are therefore to be banished from consciousness. They unconsciously motivate feverish activity to deny and retard the inevitable terror of death. The narcissist cannot accept limitations on his drive for self-gratification.

The major difference between the conceptions of redemption as enunciated by Becker and the Rav is in the availability of a form to assist man in his quest. Becker states that it is almost too much to ask of men that they

¹³ Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, "The Lonely Man of Faith," *op. cit.*, pp. 3-65.

continue to experience fully the drive for self-expression and need for self-surrender.¹⁴ The Rav insists that men could achieve this ontological state via *Halachic*, normative living. Every Jew can live an exalted, redemptive existence by following the Judaic precepts which regulate both of these needs in cyclical form. Assertion needs to be followed by withdrawal, which is always temporary, for the individual is called upon to advance once again toward full victory. *Halachic* man successfully oscillates between these two states of being. Modern man does not because withdrawal represents defeat, an intolerable affront to the heroic gesture.

The modern Jew is exposed to the all-pervasive cultural trends of secularization, narcissism and heroic action. If he is *Halachically* committed he invariably encounters a clash in values and behavioral temptations that could be resolved with the preeminent assertion of *Halachic* guidelines. The tension may be great, but the direction of the decision is toward the tradition. The Jew without *Halachic* supports is more prone to succumb to the temptations of the hedonistic values which permeate the modern moral ethos. It is more difficult for him to place a rein on heroic pursuits because he has not internalized self-abnegation through Jewish religious forms. We need to find ways to help the modern Jew to resist the penetration of these alien secular values that are inimical to the vital interests of Jewish communal survival.

Combatting Individualism and Narcissism

Prior to the coining of the term "new narcissism," Irving Greenberg equated the hedonistic impulse with the fun morality.¹⁵ He observed that a reversal of the ascetic psychology and morality was taking place. The fun morality reflects a particular type of

consciousness which rejects the normative as old-fashioned and espouses privacy as a virtue. Work is rationalized, a means to an end. The focus of life becomes the enjoyment of the fruits of affluence. The new ethic is hedonistic and privatistic and is alien to the religious ethic which is ascetic and communal.

Greenberg asserts that the Jews' greater involvement with the new ethos while their religion is presented as deeply steeped in the old is one of the reasons for the greater Jewish defection from religion to secularism in America. The old ethos is symbolized by Rabbi Soloveitchik's depiction of the restrained act as the *Halachic* ideal of self-discipline. This ethos posits the act of withdrawal in the imminent moment of victory as the true test of the religious personality. For the religious personality even the mundane is invested with sacredness, a perspective that is alien to the majority of American Jews whose orientation has become secularized.

Secularization refers to the process by which sectors of society and culture are removed from the domination of religious symbols and institutions. It affects the totality of cultural life and may be observed in the decline of religious content in the arts, philosophy and literature and in the rise of science as a secular perspective on the world. The process of secularization has a subjective side as well. Just as there is a secularization of society and culture, so is there a secularization of consciousness. This means that modern society has produced an increasing number of individuals who look upon the world and their own lives without the benefit of religious interpretations.¹⁶

There are also individuals who effectively segregate their lives into public secular activity and private religious behavior. Thus a religious preference can be abandoned as readily as it was first adopted. It cannot fulfill the classical task of religion which is that of

¹⁴ Ernest Becker, *op. cit.*, p. 173.

¹⁵ Irving Greenberg, "Jewish Values and the Changing American Ethic," *Tradition*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (Summer 1968), pp. 42-74.

¹⁶ Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*. (New York: Doubleday & Co., 1967), pp. 108.

constructing a common world within which all of social life receives ultimate meaning binding on everybody. The polarization of religion into private and public sectors brought about by secularization and the concomitant loss of commonality leads to the marketing situation, which refers to the packaging and marketing of religion as a commodity in order to be made attractive to its adherents.¹⁷

The hedonistic orientation, coupled with secularist leanings in behavior and consciousness, has placed the modern American Jew in the midst of the cultural map of American society. He is deeply involved in this ethos. We are assuming that this involvement, which may lead to total assimilation, is not a wholesome portent for the future of Jewish life, that there needs to be some active response by the organized Jewish community to these developments.

Greenberg poses two possible responses: withdrawal, and acceptance with an attempt to influence. The drawbacks of the American Jewish community's withdrawal into its own enclaves away from the majority culture are many. It is difficult to be hermetically sealed off in a society such as ours; only a small group of Jews is prepared to withdraw, thus leaving the millions of other Jews subject to total assimilation; there is no guarantee that after several years the isolated group will not be swept into the stream of American culture; withdrawal reflects poverty of imagination. It is not a creative response.¹⁸

Greenberg then describes the possibilities inherent in the second response, which is the acceptance, refinement, and ultimate mastery of the new environment and ethic. The basis of the new approach is the negation of withdrawal as the prime value and the affirmation of pleasure in its stead. "There is an earthy quality in the tradition which undoubtedly explains why the Jews secularized so quickly. They were more easily attuned to the new hedonistic tendencies and attitudes . . . A

tradition able to affirm pleasure and channel it and give it meaning can have a powerful appeal.¹⁹ Therefore, programs need to be devised that incorporate the hedonistic component of Jewish tradition in an attempt to influence the Jew's behavior within a secularist culture.

While we espouse similar sentiments regarding the Jewish community's selective involvement in the secular society as the means for fashioning creative options for Jewish expression, the point of view that will now be explored sets its boundaries within the Jewish community itself. We have to do much work with estranged Jews who have already successfully assimilated in the society. Our efforts must be directed toward their integration in the Jewish community. The major themes in the following proposals are community, tradition and rituals. They are designed as some antidotes to individualism, narcissism, and modernity.

Building a Sense of Community

I have discussed previously the Jewish communal agency's role as a mediating structure between the public sphere of bureaucratic megastructures and the private sphere of personal identity.²⁰ The concepts deserve further elaboration.

The bureaucratic megastructures are alienating in that they are not helpful in providing meaning and identity for individual existence which are to be realized in the private sphere. In private life, however, the individual is very much left to his own devices and is uncertain and anxious. He could even perceive his life as anomic. Indeed, those who search for meaning to personal identity through narcissistic behavior probably discover that such meaning is elusive. The search for self-gratification is curiously insatiable and the individual is left to wallow in his hedonism without the benefit of

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 54,55.

²⁰ Norman Linzer, "A Jewish Philosophy of Social Work Practice," *Journal of Jewish Communal Service*, Vol. 55, No. 4 (Summer 1979).

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 137.

¹⁸ Irving Greenberg, *op. cit.*

an ideal that could lend transcendence to his earthly existence. The private sphere, where individualism and narcissism are dominant ideologies, cannot satisfy the craving for personal meaning.

In the public sphere, people tend to feel powerless in the face of large institutions—megastructures—controlled by those whom we do not know and whose values we often do not share. Similarly people feel irrelevant when they are sold faulty products and have little choice in purchasing and voting.²¹

There are structures that mediate between public and private spheres. They are the value-generating and value-maintaining agencies in society. The dominant mediating structures are: neighborhood, family, church, subculture and voluntary association. They are the principal expressions of the real values and the real needs of people in our society. They are, for the most part, the people-sized institutions.²²

These five mediating structures can serve to build a sense of community. The Jewish community is permeated with them. Jewish families reside in neighborhoods where they belong to synagogues, are members of Jewish agencies, send their children to Jewish schools and seek help from Jewish family service type agencies. Federations heavily dot the Jewish landscape. Yet there are many Jews who are only marginally or not affiliated with Jewish institutions and are in danger of being lost to the Jewish community. Even Jews who do elect to make use of the services of Jewish social service agencies to deal with personal and familial problems also need help in making a connection with the organized Jewish community, for their purpose may be only the resolution of a personal identity crisis in the private sphere. The Jewish agency is equipped to help the individual and the family

achieve this goal, but since it also functions as a mediating structure, it has the obligation to help individuals and families achieve some semblance of stability as Jews in an alien society. It may not view pathology as merely a psychodynamic aberration, but it must also locate it in the context of the client's struggle to find meaning in terms of his own Jewish cultural identity.

The Jewish agency, then, as a mediating structure, serves as a buffer between the Jewish individual and family and the larger society. It represents the interest and needs of its clients, even as it screens the demands of the megastructures through Jewish filters. The Jewish agency is the vital institutional link for forging a sense of community for individual Jews in order to combat alienation and anomie.

Communicating Traditional Values

The incorporation of secular values into Jewish life styles has distanced many Jews from authentic Jewish life, institutions and people. It has fostered the quickened pace of assimilation that is reflected in rising rates of intermarriage, alcoholic and drug addiction, and low fertility rates. As values are more often "caught" than "taught", it becomes difficult to counteract the influence of secular values in the lives of Jews as formal educational procedures are frequently unavailing. Contrasting authentic Jewish values need to be communicated, particularly to children who tend to be more receptive. While we do not have specific programmatic proposals to offer, we can point to the direction toward which such informal educational efforts ought to be made.

The central core of the conflict between traditional Jewish and contemporary secular values lies in the contrast between self-denial and self-discipline on one hand, and self-gratification and self-actualization on the other. The hallmark of the religious life is the former, and the essence of secular life is the latter. As an organized Jewish community we have a responsibility to communicate these

²¹ Beatrice Simcox Reiner, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

²² Peter L. Berger and Richard John Neuhaus, *To Empower People: The Role of Mediating Structures in Public Policy*. (Washington, D. C. : American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, 1977), p. 7.

traditional Jewish values as an antidote to contemporary secular values.²³

One of the ways to accomplish this task is to point out that all of us live by the traditional Jewish values of self-discipline and self-denial, but they are not perceived as religious or cultural in origin. Examples abound. The high inflationary spiral compels most of us to live within certain spending limits, thus scaling down our standard of living. We are forced to deny ourselves material possessions and discipline our consumption habits. Such self-denial has become a new way of life for many people, though not by preferred choice. This pattern can serve as a vehicle for helping people reinterpret their hedonistic values.

Another behavior pattern that could be used for teaching the traditional Jewish values of self-discipline is *tzedakah*—charity. Since many Jews give *tzedakah* to Jewish causes, it is an interesting fact that the values in giving do not just provide assistance for the recipient but benefit the giver too. The giver receives not only the pleasure of having helped someone, but he has incorporated a fundamental value in Jewish life, denying his needs for the sake of the other. The money spent on the recipient could have been put to good use in meeting the giver's own needs. Yet, the giver chose to share part of his wealth with a more needy person or institution. We may be able to help members of the Jewish community to ascertain the profound significance of their philanthropic activity as an expression of the Jewish traditional value of self-denial.

Tzedakah also represents the Jewish value of community. When an individual gives financial support even to one other person, he expresses a kinship with his brother. "If, however, there is a needy person among you, one of your kinsmen"²⁴ We should

²³ See Norman Linzer, *The Nature of Man in Judaism and Social Work*. (New York: Federation of Jewish Philanthropies, 1978), pp. 179-182, for a discussion of the implications of this conflict for social work education at the Wurzweiler School.

²⁴ *Deuteronomy* 15:7.

interpret charitable giving as an act of communal commitment and belonging. Acts of *tzedakah* can help connect estranged Jews to the Jewish community.

Self-denial for the sake of another is an essential ingredient in a successful marriage. It is an explicit obligation in Jewish tradition with regard to husband-wife relationships²⁵ as well as a sound mental health principle.²⁶ In modern times, self-denial is one of the most difficult tasks to achieve in a marital relationship because of each partner's emphasis on need-gratification. Many marital conflicts can be attributed to each partner's expectations that the other will meet his or her needs. There appears to be little responsibility for what one could do for the other prior to doing for oneself. Here, too, the Jewish values in marriage can assist marital counseling efforts to aid couples to achieve a modicum of self-denial in their marital life for their mutual need-fulfillment.

In sum, a significant way of helping Jews to become part of the Jewish community is to inculcate traditional Jewish values. The values that we have emphasized are self-denial and self-discipline along with commitment to a community, for these are at the heart of the conflict with the contemporary secular values of individualism and hedonism. We need to take responsibility for raising consciousness in these areas of value exploration.

Performing Jewish Rituals

Ritual has many functions: it creates order and reduces anxiety and provides sameness and continuity. Mortimer Ostow has asserted that "children find religious ritual agreeable and when introduced to it in childhood, will incorporate it into core Jewish identity, so that whether or not it is subsequently abandoned, it

²⁵ Maimonides, *Yad HaChazakah*, Law of Marriage 15:19, 20.

²⁶ Erich Fromm, *The Art of Loving*. (New York: Harper, 1956).

will always elicit an affective response."²⁷ Religious ritual exalts the aesthetic in people's lives. It serves to integrate them into their religious group through a collective consciousness and performance.

Religion hallows the present. "Ritual is a declaration of life in the present, a celebration of the only thing that life can celebrate: its own existence."²⁸ Ritual celebrates the present by separating the current moment from all others. The phenomenon of separation is the essential ingredient of *kedushah*, holiness, in Jewish life. The Sabbath's holiness is due to its separation from the other days of the week and the significance that that entails. Since modern man, along with the modern Jew, tends to quantify time, valuing every moment, the introduction of ritual with a religious or cultural component as a means of valuing the present should ideally be welcomed.

Those of us who work with the aged are keenly aware of the tenacity of their hold on the present. The only time they have is the present, though so many cling to the past, and the future is limited in its possibilities. Ritual, for the aged, transforms an ordinary present moment into a precious event to be treasured and remembered.²⁹

Those who observe religious rituals with their families can testify to their mystical power to transform a house of *chol*—profane—into a house of *kedushah*—sacred, a collection of individuals into a family group, isolated Jews into communal Jews.

²⁷ Mortimer Ostow, "The Psychologic Determinants of Jewish Identity," *The Israel Annals of Psychiatry and Related Disciplines* Vol. 15, No. 4 (December, 1977), pp. 320-321.

²⁸ Ernest Becker, *The Structure of Evil*. (New York: George Braziller, 1968), p. 237.

²⁹ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Insecurity of Freedom*. (New York: Farrar, Straus & Co., 1966), pp. 150-167.

Ritual, to paraphrase Heschel, lends significance to a moment. The moment is all we have, for it disappears so swiftly. Perhaps the time has come for Jewish professionals to introduce the idea of ritual to clients and members as a means of strengthening family ties and communal belonging, thereby lending meaning to their lives.

Summary

This paper began with an exploration of the sources of contemporary phenomena of irrelevance and narcissism. They were traced to psychological origins, man's urge to heroism to satisfy the craving for self-esteem, and to socio-cultural processes, the division of social life into public and private spheres, with consequences of alienation and anomie for the individual.

Man's urge to the heroic was tempered by his fear of death; the Jew's drive for majesty was controlled by his need to surrender to a Higher Power. Modern man lacks the guidelines to help him to balance the paradoxical forces toward creativity and self-abnegation, whereas the traditional Jew is guided by *Halachic* precepts. The modern Jew is buffeted by traditional and secular ethos. The temptations to succumb to the latter's hedonistic component is especially great.

Three proposals have been advanced in order to combat these temptations, particularly for non-affiliated Jews. The organized Jewish community, which includes synagogues, social agencies, Jewish schools and Federations, needs to build a sense of community, to communicate traditional values in opposition to secular values and to help Jews to perform Jewish rituals in their private lives. Only through involvement in Jewish life can the non-affiliated, marginally affiliated and even deeply affiliated Jew contribute to the perpetuation of a vibrant Jewish community.