

PURIM 2000 — A “STATE OF THE FAITH” ADDRESS

As we enter a new millennium, bookstores are filled with works on threats to the survival of American Judaism. Common explanations include intermarriage and declining birth rates. Also, authors claim, a decline in blatant anti-Semitism has enabled Jews to see their Judaism as an option, and not a status that will be foisted on them whether they like it or not. Others mention that as Israel solidifies its economic status and attempts to make peace with its neighbors, Jews in the Diaspora feel less of a need to support it. One by one, the commentators contend, traditional forces that pulled American Jews toward their ancestors’ faith are weakening.

All that might be true. But to me, the greatest threat to American Judaism is one that is common to all traditional religions, including Christianity and Islam. I am referring to the power of modernity and, in particular, secularism. Modern secular society presents a religion in itself, a religion centered around human accomplishments and the ability of each individual to compete with others and enjoy the material fruits of that competition. Here, we will focus on the failures of Judaism to cope with the challenge of modern secularism, and what we can do to meet that challenge.

In other words, this is will be like a “State of the Faith” address. But I believe that much of what will be said applies equally to other traditional faiths.

Consider the prevailing choices open to American Jews today. One option, Orthodox Judaism, hardly seems viable for more than a few who aren’t currently in the fold. The cruel irony for those who wish to expand its rolls is that Orthodox Judaism is a community-based faith that traditionally has succeeded because of how well it binds individuals to their nuclear family, extended family, and family friends. But to a community that has already given up on Orthodoxy, family now becomes a reason to avoid that faith. For Jews to elect to become Orthodox today, they now must not only leave the mainstream of society but also will lose much of what they have in common with their own families. It starts with the look from mom or dad “What? You’re becoming Orthodox? Are you nuts? What’s wrong with the Moonies?” This attitude, this sense that turning Orthodox is more like leaving home than going there, creates a huge hurdle for Orthodoxy. As a result, it is difficult to see this option becoming attractive to the mainstream form of Judaism in the next century.

The more popular option is to join a large Conservative or Reform

synagogue. This has been termed Cathedral Judaism. Though these Cathedrals are built physically and spiritually to be attractive to large numbers of Jews, I would argue that, perhaps more than any other explanation, the pathos of Cathedral Judaism is responsible for thinning the herd. These places are anything but houses of passion. Consider that the main focus of the Cathedral is the shabbat service. In these services, large groups of people congregate for hour long exercises that basically say “praise God” 50 times. That would be fine, except that many if not most of the congregants don’t even believe in God. And some that do would like to enter into a relationship with God that differs from merely giving praise, praise and more praise. Attend one of these services and you will see that whatever is causing the passionate devotion to God in many an Orthodox shul is not present at the Cathedral.

Why would unbelievers show up at these large services? First, there are often no alternatives if you want to do something at synagogue that evening or morning. But secondly, it is because after the service is over, it delivers what many have come for: a social support network. Conversations after a shabbat service rarely focus on the service itself, and typically do not even address

religious topics. Rather, the service has enabled people to get together and just talk about whatever. It has become, in essence, a social hall par excellence — a Rotary Club, if you will, that embraces families and not merely businessmen.

A clear and valuable component of Cathedral Judaism is the religious school that is offered 1-3 times a week, and that focuses largely on Jewish ritual. For adults, the synagogue also offers an opportunity to partake in the rituals of Jewish holidays. These rituals were born in a community that believed in God as a miracle worker who directly communicated His will to the Jewish people. To the extent the basis of the rituals are discussed, the synagogues will acknowledge without apology that these are traditional Jewish rituals, pure and simple. For in essence, the basis of the religion of Cathedral Judaism is Orthodox Judaism. The God of Cathedral Judaism is the omnipotent, omni-benevolent God who intervenes in nature to reward or punish people. Unfortunately, given that the congregants don't share the same traditional theological views as the Orthodox, the rituals are void of much of the original meaning. That is why, the rituals can be performed but, again, the passion is hard to come by.

Traditional Jewish theology talks about reading scripture on various levels, from the literal to the deeply symbolic. But for the mainstream, as opposed to the elite, traditional Judaism is centered around a God who directly reveals Himself to humans through specific words, specific personality characteristics, specific acts of intervention with this world and specific demands placed upon people. Whether this God and His conduct are presented in an Orthodox Shul or in a Reform Cathedral, they blatantly fly in the face of the modern sensibility.

Modern, secular culture is based on the notion of self sufficiency. The focus of life is the self — your own material wealth, ability to actualize your potential through a job, and respect you get from others. We, as individuals, are given the freedom and encouragement to compete in society for rewards. This attitude, in turn, is said to lead to the greatest benefits for us all.

But modern culture does not merely celebrate the individual, it celebrates the capacity of human kind to dominate the world. Through movies perhaps above all other media, we learn that technology is more awesome even than nature. We may not be able to live comfortably on the moon, or able to fly without an airplane, but with visual tricks we can make

virtually any imagined phenomenon come alive. Revelation? That seems to have no place at all in the modern mentality.

In light of this attitude, it is not hard to see why neither Orthodox nor Cathedral Judaism would appeal to a large group of people seeking to marry their modern temperament with some form of spirituality. These forms of Judaism are based on the notion that the Torah was given to us from a God who intervenes in the world. And they are also based on the notion that we are to view ourselves above all, as his servants. People today seek a form of spirituality that stops short of these views. They need to relate to whatever God they choose as less of a servant and more existentially. They need to worship a God whose existence is harmonious with the fact that the Holocaust occurred while He was on the sidelines.

Jews are willing to accept the Torah as literature and as a source of wisdom. But modernity makes it difficult to accept it as given to us by God, or at least by the God to which it is traditionally attributed. Humanist Jews recognize all this as an opportunity, and have created a form of Judaism that strips Judaism of its metaphysical views and concentrates solely on Jewish ethics and Jewish culture. But many Jews today seek some form of

spirituality that these Humanists simply will not satisfy. They crave a God, even if it is not the God of scripture. In short, they view Jewish Humanism as throwing out the baby with the bath water. However, they don't know where to find the spirituality that they seek. In this era of job mobility and proliferating technology, it is much easier to give up the search for spirituality and enjoy a feast of man-made treasures.

I would like to propose an alternative to the above. The alternative must involve tolerance for different viewpoints, so I am hardly proposing a new orthodoxy. Rather, I am proposing a new set of reforms with the goal of meeting a certain standard. Specifically, in order to survive as an alternative to a thoroughly secular mentality, the Judaism we seek must be such that its members are distinguished both in their own eyes and in the eyes of others as an example, a "light unto the nations." It must inspire children by teaching them how Judaism has made such a difference in their parents' lives. And it must represent a continuation of what we now know as Judaism, rather than such a sharp departure that it cannot meaningfully use that designation.

That is the standard for success. The way to meet this standard must

involve a new approach to the concept of divinity, to the role and functions of the synagogue, to the idea of human virtue, and to the importance of the Jewish mission in life.

Affirming Divinity -- For many, these are scientific times. If you can't prove the existence of something with science, it doesn't hold up to the sacred principle of empiricism, and it is thus unworthy of belief. For others, opinions of that which transcends science can be held. But even then, people are skeptical. So, for example, people talk about believing in God, but then they sound unsure. And when they seem confident in the existence of God, you scratch the surface and find that their God is a vague concept like a force or spirit that has no real meaning to them except on the rare occasion where they find the belief in God meets their emotional needs.

The first critical point is that Jews need to affirm God. And they need to affirm Him, as the Good Book says, with all their heart, with all their soul, and with all their might. But this might not be possible if God is approached primarily through scripture. And it might not be possible if God is understood to mean the traditional deity — omnipotent, omni-benevolent, and present in the world as one who intervenes in natural laws as a means to

reward good and punish evil. That is but one narrow conception of God. By contrast, Judaism in the next century must embrace the idea that God could mean a number of things to a number of different Jews. So, for example, the humanist Erich Fromm was not content to simply call himself an atheist or agnostic, even though he was unable to believe in a God as a transcendent being. For Fromm, God was conceived as an idea or symbol -- a symbol of our highest value, or most desirable good. And armed with this radical notion of God, Fromm was at least able to attend a synagogue service and find meaning in the concept of divinity that gave him sustenance.

Like Fromm, I would urge that a theology satisfying to the modern Jew needs to be based primarily on philosophical contemplation, rather than scripture. But unlike Fromm, I do not believe that God has to be viewed merely symbolically. What is critical to viewing God as a being, rather than just an idea, is to appreciate the unity of life. If people are convinced that the phenomena we encounter every day have multiple sources, and are ultimately metaphysically separate in every respect, they will likely never see God as more than an idea. But I believe that contemplation of science, of the basic energy and particles that underlie all of life, does lead to a conviction in the

unity of life. All of life, in short, may be viewed as a single organism, or at least as the expression or unfolding of a single vital source.

How does that lead us to a “God” worthy of that term? We all know that there is a self, and there is the world outside ourselves. Whenever we encounter that world -- whether manifested as another person, or an object like a lamp or a stove -- a meeting of some kind takes place. But whenever we encounter another in a particular way, so that we stop fixating on ourselves and how we can use the Other, and instead contemplate the unity of life as it is revealed through this encounter, we come to develop a consciousness of God. Though it is difficult to do for a modern person steeped in the virtues of self-reliance, the temptation of self-obsession must be fought if God is what you seek. He is most apparent to those who respect the relation between the self and the Other, who beholds the Other with the awe with which Van Gogh beholds a flower, or we behold a Van Gogh.

God is everywhere. But He is particularly in the space between us when these encounters take place. He may be viewed as the nucleus, the inner-most spark or soul in all of our brains and bodies. Again, that nucleus, that inner-most soul is not apparent to those who are too busy to attempt the

encounter.

Consider that in our body, there is a brain that controls faculties throughout the body. Similarly, in life, it violates no modern notion to suspect that while every earthly being is, in one respect, distinct, there is another sense in which each such being is but a cell or superficial manifestation of a single, great being. And that the latter being has an inner most core that animates all the more superficial manifestations of life. This inner most core likely transcends space and time, or even the notion of causality. But even though it cannot be directly experienced with our senses, or defined through language, that core, that eternal nucleus, is a fertile place to find a meaningful God.

This perspective is one approach to God that could make sense to the modern mind. But it is hardly the only one. Another who has difficulty believing in an inner-most soul to life might view God as the totality of being. The key is that for each individual, a God is affirmed that can ground one's own sense of self and relationship to one's world. Organized religions must recognize that people should feel free to encounter God in a manner that seems suited to their time, and not to the times when the Torah or Talmud were written.

But let us return to the notion of God as the universe's inner most soul or nucleus whom we find in any authentic meeting or encounter. The consequences of adopting this new perspective are tremendous. The God about which we learn through the encounter is no longer associated primarily with particular events in history, or particular books written in history. He is associated with the mundane, as well as the exalted. He doesn't communicate directly with us only at certain times, but not others. He communicates whenever we are open to listening. And yes, consistent with modernity, we know God best through the laws of nature and through the teachings of our own heart and conscience.

Coming to affirm God primarily through daily life encounters as opposed to scriptural revelation does not only comport better with the modern temperament, but also is a more certain path to a lifelong conviction. With revelation, God becomes known based on words, and specific earthly events and ideas attributed to Him. When future events occur that seem inconsistent with our expectations about such a God, faith starts to waver. By contrast, the Eternal Thou that underlies each true encounter is not known through language, or even through ideas. He is known through unspoken

emotions, and in particular through love and inner peace. Whenever He is sought, as when a person seeks to look beneath the appearance of any earthly object and refrain from attempting to utilize that object, He may be found. And He will give sustenance, He will inspire.

We hear often in this society about a cosmic force. But forces connote mindless, unfeeling entities. It is important to reflect on whether God, the source of unity, is not responsible for creating and sustaining beings of intelligence. And if this is true, if indeed we have minds, why not assume that He too possesses infinite amounts of intelligence?

Can we care about the God that we come to know through the earthly encounter, if he is not telling us exactly what he wants of us or that he even possesses a dominant faculty known to us as a will? Can we care about this God if he is not always rewarding our virtue or punishing our vice? It may be harder. But it is still extremely easy to those who are determined to encounter life with their whole spirit and to look for the inner spark, the sense of eternal unity, in whatever they are encountering. When you do this, you remain in love with God. And if you aren't sustained by praising God 50 times an hour, you nevertheless derive no more satisfaction in the world than by honoring

Him through your love and conduct.

The Synagogue -- The synagogue of the future should hardly resemble that which we now associate with Cathedral Judaism. The new synagogue should be a place of passion. Anything practically that could generate that passion — even a good fight — would probably be an improvement.

To begin, synagogue activities should take place in small groups, not large ones. In small groups, people can pursue options that have unique meaning to them, rather than having to be roped into activities as the only means to further their Judaism. Consider a synagogue on Friday night. Instead of everyone praising God 50 times with the same exact prayers they have read for 30 years, they should have four or five different activities available to them. One might be a prayer service, with plenty of opportunities for sustained silent prayers where you can speak directly to God without distractions, except the passionate prayers of other congregants. The second option might be a discussion of a Jewish philosopher, or of Jewish history. The third option might be an exercise in Jewish meditation. Fourth, there might be a group devoted to social action. And so on.

Small activity-oriented groups do more than just enable Jews to select

activities that are particularly meaningful to each individual. They also enable Jews to find other congregants with whom they share common religious interests. Today, members of synagogue meet outside of the temple in small groups, or “havorot” which are typically formed based on geographical proximity, or the age of one’s children. This is fine, if the synagogue is a social club. But if it is to develop a passionate religiosity, this type of bond is hardly adequate. The synagogue must do more to develop interests that are religious in nature. And for that, the small group is crucial.

Also crucial is a change in the role of the Rabbi. Rabbis are useful to teach courses where particular expertise is required. But if the Rabbi is doing all of the work, how are we to become a People of Priests, as the saying goes? Torah discussions are perfect examples — they should be led by different congregants each week. And when discussions take place, the congregants should be encouraged to address fundamental issues and feel free to do so in a non-Orthodox manner. Currently, the synagogue rarely can cope with any big issue discussions. If they do take place, congregants learn the traditional answers, without hearing any radically different alternatives. Congregants need to be encouraged to spit out those alternatives, even if they involve

atheism. Only by examining the philosophical underpinnings of the faith are people going to become confident in their own religious attitudes.

And Rabbis, insofar as they asked to lead a congregation, must do so in a way that challenges the congregation, that really shakes them up. As long as they are paid six figures, which they commonly are today, Rabbis might be too afraid to bite the hand that feeds them. But if the Rabbis do not provocatively confront the Jewish community on how it can so snugly fit into this secular society, then why have Rabbis at all?

Human Virtue — “The pursuit of knowledge for its own sake, an almost fanatical love of justice, and the desire for personal independence, these are the features of the Jewish tradition which make me thank my lucky stars that I belong to it.” So said Albert Einstein, who is generally considered a secular Jew. And he is viewed as secular not only because he believed in an untraditional God, but also because the facets of the Jewish mentality that he exemplifies have never been given the proper respect in the Rabbinic concept of Jewish virtue.

Oh sure, you hear about the importance of Jewish learning. But remember that until modern times, Jews were commonly discouraged from

learning secular studies, such as history and philosophy. They were only encouraged to learn for the sake of their relationship to God and the Jewish community, and not based on the idea that all learning is holy. How much do traditional Jews know about other religions? Or even about the post-biblical history of their own people? We must embrace learning about secular philosophy and other religions as deepening our own Judaism. For just as it is most holy to give to charity without an ulterior motive, so it is most holy to learn for the sake of learning and not because a particular type of learning will advance your career or gain you respect from your community.

As for the desire for personal independence, a visitor to a synagogue would have to wonder why Einstein was attributing that passion to Judaism. We are taught that Judaism is based on the Torah and Talmud. And in these works, individual Jews are praised, above all, for their obedience to authority, and their dependence on the Divine word. We all read the story of Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac, which signifies that there is no virtue more important than obedience to God and its corollary, obedience to the Law. We should even be willing to kill our own children if we view this to be God's will. This has been seen as virtue in the highest degree.

It is true that the Torah, and in particular the work of the Prophets, is replete with instances where heroes challenge authority figures, who are seen as misguided. But in modern America, we are not taught to view authority in such terms. Contrary to Einstein, Jews today are hardly taught to be fanatical, be it fighting for justice or pursuing any other goal. Rather, virtue is seen in humbly appreciating God's wonders, as manifest in this world, and to find your own place as a respectable, and yes obedient, member of society. Our scripture speaks in terms of keeping your faith and trust in a God who has entered into a covenant with us. Some even attribute the Holocaust to divine retribution for Jewish sins, and a much larger group simply shrug it off as inexplicable mystery. Virtue, they teach, consists of faith in God's goodness and omnipotence regardless of the events on this planet.

In fact, I would argue, Jewish virtue consists of more than piety and obedience. That is but one side of a coin. To appreciate the other side, you might consider what has been called in humanistic literature "Underground Judaism." Just as there exists in the tradition an appreciation for obedience, there is another side of the tradition that is quite rebellious. Jews have been

some of society's greatest muckrakers, constantly fighting injustice and complaining about any social state of affairs that runs short of utopia. Jews also require independence, and it is precisely this spirit that has caused so many to reject a religion that holds people out to be servants — particularly when what they are following are the dictates of writers who have not lived for more than 2000 years. Further, Underground Judaism copes with the problems of this world not with equanimity but with humor. Jewish humor is often ribald, self deprecating, and even based on laughing at how a beneficent God could possibly have created a world like this. Few peoples have such an innate appreciation of humor as the Jews, and this is necessary to maintain a faith in the goodness of God in light of all the tragedies that we have faced over the millennia.

In short, Jewish virtue must be expanded to include the attributes identified by Einstein -- a passion for autonomy, the eradication of injustice, and learning as a labor of love. Those who pursue these virtues are as much our role models as the traditional Jews who modeled humility and obedience to God. And don't be surprised if the Jew as trench fighter or rebel is rough around the edges -- because coping mechanisms that are not necessarily

suitable for polite company are an accepted part of the culture.

Traditionalists who decry the anger of the Jewish activist who fights like hell to support the economic underclass obviously has little appreciation for the tremendous achievements of Jews in working for justice in a rough and tumble world. Anyone who tells you that that anger, that rebelliousness is not virtuous is merely concealing half of the tradition in an effort to further their own pro-conformist agenda.

The Jewish Mission in Life — The Jewish Mission might be characterized by numerous things. But I would suggest a top three — an unusual commitment to principles, to honoring God, and to social reform. The idea of living of life marked by the commitment to principles is perhaps the most critical aspect of the Jewish Mission. Traditionally, Jews have excelled in demonstrating their commitment to principles. And it is this commitment that resulted in their unswerving adherence to the Law and to minhag, or Jewish custom. Spend a day with an Ultra Orthodox Jew, and you will see an unusual approach to clothing, eating habits and worship — in short, you will find people who distinguish themselves in matters of ritual.

I am not suggesting that people give up their rituals. But for

generations, the rituals have lost their grasp on most of the Jewish people of America. Presumably, the community remains gifted in being able to honor commitment to principles that have meaning for them. But following hundreds of Biblical commandments, and the words of ancient Rabbis who interpreted them, has simply been unable to move the modern American Jew. We need an alternative.

Jews should have faith in themselves and their community that generations of devotion to principles have developed an unusual gift of being steadfast and mentally strong. The challenge, now, is to find a set of principles that will be meaningful to Jews today. What I would suggest is an ambitious effort on the part of every practicing member of the faith to develop ethical principles that Jews should honor with the commitment that they have previously brought to keeping rituals. It is high time that we embarked on such a program — at least 1500 years since the Rabbis created the Talmud. This program should be based on the study not merely of Biblical times, but of thousands of years of human history up to the present. And by principles of “ethics,” I do not mean this term in the narrow sense of our duties to others, but in the classical sense of how we choose to live our lives. In other words,

we need as congregations, and as a faith, to establish a new set of principles that will establish affirmative obligations to others, to ourselves and to God. And these principles must go way beyond the mere adherence to the law of the land. It would be tragic for Jews to give up the obligation to honor the Biblical commandments only to replace them with an amoral “live the way you feel” philosophy.

To adopt this approach risks the development of a new Orthodoxy. God forbid we would pursue any course that strips the individual of the right to follow his or her conscience. But it is inevitable that any effort to develop ethical principles that inspire action requires that Judaism take on some type of content, at least in terms of how it is generally practiced and recognized. There are those who celebrate the fact that modern Judaism can be viewed as content-less. To be a practicing Jew, they teach, you need only to study Judaism. You need not come to any specific point of view about God, ethics, politics, or anything. That is Judaism’s beauty.

Perhaps. But the faith will be much more meaningful if modern Jews take on a concerted effort to create new doctrines for a modern world. And no area, I suggest, would be as fruitful for this project as the area of ethical

principles, as this term is broadly defined. Maybe the members of a Jewish congregation will take up environmental causes as their religious duty, maybe vegetarianism, maybe eradicating poverty, maybe something altogether different. But as long as there is a serious effort on the part of a community to use Jewish teachings and Jewish inspiration in order to find new binding principles, whatever content emerges will be authentically Jewish.

Another important component of the Jewish Mission is the need to honor God. You can never say enough about the centrality of God to Judaism or the impediments that passionate monotheism faces today. If parents are unable to rekindle that passion, they will never be able to interest their children in stories about God or lessons derived from our ancestors' attempts at worshipping God. Every individual who finds meaning in God will find a different way to relate to the divine or to conceive of God. But I would like to see all these approaches come together in the affirmation of one principle: that there is no ethical pursuit higher than to live in a way that honors the innermost soul of all whom we encounter: namely, God.

There is perhaps no greater way to honor God than by treating all people with respect, and to work diligently to reform the society. In this

instance, Judaism is not clashing with modernity, but actually harmonizing with it. After all, of all the world's greatest religions, none is as earthly based as Judaism. This is not a religion that generally focuses on the after life, or ways of achieving nirvana by spiritually checking out of a decadent world. By contrast, like the secular humanists, Jews have always focused on the here and now. Jewish people during recent centuries, when they have increasingly been allowed to enter the mainstream of society, have offered their thanks by attempting to uplift the society at large. Socialist movements in Europe and the United States were largely Jewish. The white fight for African American equality was spearheaded by Jews, including prominent theologians.

Individual Jews entering the 21st century will be struck by the me-first attitude of a secular society fat and happy with economic opportunity. To be sure, we will find humanistic faiths, such as the so-called secular humanists, who embrace social reform as a critical religious duty. But secular reformers commonly lose their faith when, after years of effort, they begin to feel hopeless that an individual or small group could really make a difference in a world of billions, particularly when the road to social progress often involves cooperating with rogues and liars. Who needs it? Religious Jews should not

be so easily frustrated. To Judaism, all of life is divine, even the smallest flower. When a Jew is able to lift up the world, be it ever so slightly, that act is accorded infinite significance, for it lifts up God Himself. After all, the more that you love God, the more you would value the importance of incremental benefits to His world.

Judaism does not demand that we as individuals serve as perfect utilitarians, by producing a certain amount of social good in this world. What Judaism demands is that we honor God by uplifting His world in a principled way, even if our accomplishments are modest. We must act as models for our children and others regarding the importance of working tirelessly to help the less fortunate. To do so passionately and in a principled fashion is sufficient. If our individual accomplishments appear to be negligible on the surface, we are assured that they are profoundly important to God.