

PURIM 2003

Rabbi. There was a time when that word was hallowed. It wasn't so long ago. The era of the prophets had ended. Men with names like Jeremiah, Isaiah, Amos and Micah had passed like dinosaurs into the Jewish night. But they had successors. And whereas the prophets might not have been honored in their own societies, their successors, the rabbis, were fully appreciated. They were the accepted and revered leaders of their community. Morally. Spiritually. Even politically.

Back in the day, the rabbis were generally not paid professionals. They didn't train specifically to enter their future vocation. Their income was primarily a function of what they were able to earn as carpenters, merchants, or whatever other non-rabbinical trade they happened to ply. They didn't choose their destiny as rabbis; they fell into this status, on the basis of having personified the values that most merited honor in the Jewish community.

Lord knows, those days are over. The beginning of the end was the period after the close of the Middle Ages when rabbis began to receive salaries for their labor. But the die was cast with the creation of the modern synagogue. Rabbis who preside over these cathedrals are community leaders only in a very limited sense of that term. For the modern synagogue does not form a community that shapes the attitudes and behaviors of its members 24/7. It is merely a club. A place where people congregate on special occasions – Bar and Bat Mitzvahs, funerals, Shabbos, the High Holidays. On those occasions, rabbis must earn their keep, just like lawyers must excel when the gavel falls, or surgeons must act when the patients have been anesthetized. Even the congregants, as long as they are in the synagogue, have obligations. They're expected to behave, and think, as Jews. But when the ceremony is over, and it's time to scatter, the congregants feel free to act in ways that are not recognizably different from the ways of secular society. And the rabbis? When their official duties are over, they're expected to behave respectably, but it's not necessary that they exude holiness. That's not in their job descriptions.

After all is said and done, we still place reasonably high demands on our rabbis. They must be able to deliver an interesting sermon and, when necessary, feign a pleasant smile. They must be truly saddened by a death in the congregation, and generally familiar with a wide range of Jewish and secular scholarship. Cocktail party familiarity, at least. Enough periodically to work intellectual references into the all-important weekly sermons. The moments when instead of turning on our TVs to get the news stories, we perk up our Jewish ears and get the op-EDS.

Not every person today could be a rabbi. But few rabbis today could meet the lofty standards placed on their predecessors.

As we sit in our cathedrals and absorb the homily of the week, rarely do we reflect on missed opportunities. After all, most sermons are pleasant enough to listen to. They also are delivered by professionals who are worthy of our respect, for these professionals work hard and fulfill legitimate needs in our society. The shame, really, isn't what rabbis *are*, but what they could be and are not. Perhaps we don't let them lead us, for we are not looking for moral and spiritual leaders, and when we want political leaders, we expect to locate them from the ranks of lawyers and businesspeople.

Rather than blame rabbis, perhaps we should question ourselves. What do we expect from our priests? What do we want from them? If they tried to speak their minds, if they attempted to shake us out of our complacency and spoke the truth about the gulf between true religiosity and the present state of most Jewish congregants, how quickly would we throw them out on their kiesters? And why would anyone want to train for years and years, just to get the opportunity to collect unemployment insurance?

Recognizing, then, that we must not scape goat the modern rabbi, the fact remains that they serve as exemplars of what is missing in modern Jewish life. To make this point clear, we will next examine the pre-eminent topics that rabbis have addressed during this past century. These topics have changed over time. The focus during the period dominated by Hitler was replaced by a very different emphasis during the latter part of the century. But what both of these topics have in common is that they fail to confront Jewish spirituality at its roots. And *that* is the failure that the rabbis must rectify in this current century – at least if they want Judaism to make a dent in the secular lifestyles that their congregants adopt outside the cathedral.

From the time of Hitler's election as chancellor until the time most baby boomers became adults, the American rabbinate was obsessed with one topic above all: the survival of the Jewish people. In the 1930s, Jewish America was faced with the threats of both assimilation and anti-Semitism. The survival issue took on crisis proportions in the 1940s, with the slaughter of six million Jews and the shaky creation of the state of Israel. In subsequent decades, demographers tracked birth rates and intermarriage statistics to show that should trends continue, it wouldn't take too many more generations before Jews were either Orthodox or dead.

None of this was lost on the Reform or Conservative rabbis, the leaders of the vast majority of religiously-active Jews in America. Those of us who attended their synagogues during the 60s and early 70s remember well such comments from the pulpit as “what Hitler couldn't do, intermarriage is doing.” Rabbis could safely sound these alarms because they knew they were preaching to the choir. Their congregants were as concerned as any rabbi that the herd was inevitably being thinned. While the hippies sang “where have all the flowers gone,” the congregants lamented “where are all the Jews going?” And where will their *grandchildren* be going? To church, no doubt. Or to ethnically-integrated country clubs. In light of all this kvetching, the rabbis couldn't talk enough about Jewish survival to suit the faithful.

In 1967, and continuing indefinitely thereafter, Israel came under a horrible state of siege. This gave rabbis an even greater opportunity to warn of the dangers at the gate. Now, outside threats were as potent as those from within. Instead of the tragedy of the mixed marriage, rabbis could lament the Egyptian tank or the Palestinian bomb. Instead of inveighing against Jewish assimilation, rabbis could castigate the nations of Europe, whose statesmen washed their hands of the people of Israel much like their predecessors washed their hands of the victims of Krystallnacht. The danger to Israel, like the threat of the vanishing Jew, was clear and present. Those dangers became common sermon topics. And the congregants, once again, were happy to heed the call to defend the good name of their heritage.

So survival was the obsession from the 30s through the mid-70s. By then, however, more and more Baby Boomers were coming of age and having children. They were tasked with the job of raising authentic Jews. And this required the Boomers to confront their own ability to serve as Jewish role models for their kids. So the critical mass of the congregants were ripe for what the rabbis had longed to deliver: homilies in praise of *authentic Judaism*.

Anyone who has walked into a Reform temple during recent years knows exactly what I mean by those words. Authentic Judaism refers to the Old-Time Religion, albeit with a modern face. When you go to a Reform temple, you still see signs of modernity: women and men sitting together; references to the matriarchs, not merely the patriarchs. But increasingly, the sounds and sights of tradition are extolled. Now, rabbis mock ham sandwiches, at least when consumed on Yom Kippur. Now, rabbis discuss the value of Jewish symbols – like the yarmulke, the Sukkoth tent or the Shabbos candle. Authentic Judaism refers to a life that, in the words of Gunther Plaut, is “Jewishly more meaningful” – a life spent studying the Torah, if not the Talmud. In short, authentic Jews incorporate into their lives as many traditional rituals and activities as they can, consistent with the principle that they find these practices meaningful to them as individuals.

To the modern cathedral rabbi, the topics we've been discussing flow from the lips as effortlessly as a fish swims in water. The fact is that warning of the threats to one's survival comes easily to a member of *any* nationality that has recently experienced genocide, be it the Jewish, the Armenian or the Gypsy. Let the Christians trumpet the Books of Isaiah. Oi vay, do we Jews know our Jeremiah? But that was the central topic of yesterday. Today, the rabbis have found even a more natural outlet for their sermonizing talents.

Consider how little rabbis must sacrifice when they ask their congregants to return to tradition. How simple it must be for rabbis to ask the faithful to spend more time in the synagogue. The rabbis are there anyway; it's their job. The more congregants who show up, the greater the audience for the rabbi. Such a deal? And what about those holy books that modern rabbis keep praising? Rabbis are already expected to know them cold. It only stands to reason that they'd want to preach to people who will understand what they're talking about. As for Jewish rituals, nobody ever really wanted to look at rabbis' bald spots, or watch them eat cheeseburgers. So when rabbis ask that we find meaning in traditional symbols or prohibitions, they're only asking others to try out a lifestyle that they're supposed to exemplify. Who wouldn't want the company?

Again. Just as it doesn't behoove us to scape goat the modern rabbi, it would be equally silly to lampoon the value of calling out threats to Jewish people, or the trend toward traditional ritual observance and scholarship. All Jews appreciate the dangers of modern life. And all Jews – authentic or otherwise – appreciate the emptiness of a faith void of ritual or scholarship. But here's the rub: none of these topics really gets to the heart of what's missing in Judaism today. And none of these topics addresses what rabbis in particular can do to exemplify how we, as a people, can achieve our professed ultimate goal, and become a “light unto thy nations.”

This talk began with the concept of the rabbi, and its hallowed nature. To the communities they led, rabbis were holy. More than competent professionals, they were nothing less than muses. To understand the essence of Judaism is to grasp exactly what these holy men inspired.

On the surface, they served as models of a particular type of character. Wise. Loving. Reverential. Bearded. But try not to think of these rabbis as portraits to behold. Think of them instead as painters, as creators. And what they created, above all else, was an array of relationships. An array of encounters. Whether they were encountering a dear friend, a stranger, an entire community, an animal, their planet, or the eternal ground of Being, they forged relationships that were unmistakably Jewish, and that inspired a people for centuries upon end to follow in their footsteps.

When people talk of the golden age of rabbinic Judaism, they think of the ideological struggle between the schools of two men -- Hillel and Shammai. Both are best approached by their relationships, and particularly by the way in which they encountered other human beings. Shammai is known as a *parush*. These are people distinguished by their separation from others who are considered sinful or unclean, according to strict ritualistic standards. Hillel, by contrast, is a *hasid* – much like the patriarch Abraham was before him. This is a person distinguished by a visceral love for other people, *all* of whom they strive to encounter with gentleness, patience, compassion and humility. Students of the Talmud know that, according to tradition, the House of Hillel was declared supreme over the House of Shammai by a heavenly voice. And so Jewish law came to be based largely on Hillel's rulings. And the ideal of the rabbi came to be shaped by Hillel's inspiring presence.

Presence is perhaps the key word here. When a lowly member of the community encounters a rabbi like Hillel, both individuals are experienced by the other as profoundly unique and profoundly present. You might expect this attitude from the congregant who meets the great Hillel, but what is notable here is that the congregant, however trivially he or she would be regarded in the community, would be equally present in the mind of the rabbi.

Buddhist spirituality discusses the goal of eliminating the “I.” Judaism, which celebrates the encounter between the “self” and the “other” never preaches such a goal. But it does seek to jettison certain features of the I: namely, selfishness, and its twin brother, pride. To be a *hasid* in the traditional sense of that term is to meet another person with the same kind of love that you instinctively feel for yourself. And the longer this meeting takes place, the more you can experience the other person's needs and the less you'll cleave to the selfish and prideful goals that your ego had previously established for itself.

In creating these kinds of relationships with one's fellow human being, the *hasid* obeys the injunction in Deuteronomy to satisfy the unique needs of all who are needy. When it comes to being treated with respect and dignity, doesn't everyone fall into the category of the needy? Nothing satisfies those needs more acutely than an encounter with a true *hasid*.

We've all met such people. Sometimes they are children. Sometimes adults. In our

society, however, they're a rare breed at any age. When you meet them, you ask yourself “what have *I* done to deserve so much of their attention and honor?” The answer, of course, is that you needn't have done anything other than having been born the child of a human mother. And that entitles you to the same kind of concern from hasids that they would show a great sage or a political prince.

In addition to modeling a certain type of relationship with other persons, the great rabbis have stood out in how they relate to composite entities (like the Jewish community, their society as a whole or planet Earth) or to abstract entities (like truth, justice or peace). While it may be said, particularly when the Jews were ghettoized, that the great rabbis were confined to act locally, there is little question that to be a great rabbi is to be impelled to think philosophically and globally, and to emote, with the greatest of passion, about the nature of those thoughts.

Franz Rosenzweig once termed Jewish existence a “vigil for the Day of Redemption.” This is a pregnant statement. It expresses first the object of Jewish life: to usher in a world that has been radically transformed into one where the values personified by the Hasid are the norm, not the exception. Secondly, in the idea of a vigil, it expresses the pastime of the Hasid-like rabbi before redemption occurs – which, of course, is throughout the conceivable future. This vigil, if it is true to the Jewish ideal, must be a communal one, with as much company as possible. Moreover, while others are sleeping, or at least reclining, the rabbi is wide awake. Spiritually and physically attuned to the task at hand.

Some might call this type of rabbi idealistic. Or even Pollyannaish. Only an idiot would suggest that this world is redeemable. That people aren't forever destined to be selfish and greedy. That the poor won't always be with us.

Judaism is a religion of pragmatism. Yet the holiest among us tend at times to show another side. This is reflected in the vigil that is kept when the Hasid-like rabbi encounters the dream of peace, or the prospect of justice reigning supreme throughout the world. It is said that one night, 60 years before the Common Era, a young Hillel was too poor to pay his way to enter the House of Study. So rather than missing two great rabbis debate, he climbed up on the roof and listened. He was so absorbed in what they were saying that he didn't notice the snow falling around him. The next day, he was found unconscious on the rooftop skylight. Hillel had failed in his vigil – at least that night. But that didn't stop him from resuming the vigil as soon as he was resuscitated, or from devoting his adult life largely to determining how best to create a society marked by justice, and a world where peace is prized over all else, including, even, truth.

Just as we all have met people who routinely treat human individuals with the kind of love and respect that we have attributed to the great rabbis, so have we met the type whose commitment to social redemption can best be described as a lifelong vigil. But again, they are rare, because the hopes to which they must cling in order to continue their vigil will constantly be dashed by the grim realities of life on this planet.

Somehow, however, the great rabbis are able to inspire others to continue this vigil. Largely, it is by convincing them that without the vigil, a person gives up his or her Judaism.

But these are merely empty words, if the rabbis don't serve also as people who practice what they preach. This is why the Reverend Martin Luther King was such a great preacher. He didn't just mouth words. He changed the world. And he was willing to die for what he believed. The great reverends, the great rabbis, are willing to risk much. For the vigil requires that they be awake, when perhaps it is most healthful to sleep. Judaism, then, is a religion that demands not merely wakefulness but also courage. You can't be a "light unto thy nations" when you're unwilling to climb to the top of the lighthouse and effect some repairs.

It is customary when contrasting the great legends of yesterday with the all-too-human toilers of today to talk about how much greater were the burdens that the old legends had to bear. This would certainly be true in the case of rabbi Akiba, who is believed to have died smiling while reciting the shema, even though the Romans had used iron combs to rip the skin off of his body. Modern rabbis may not have it as tough as Akiba, yet, in one critical respect, their lot is incredibly more difficult than those of their predecessors. The ancient rabbis were fortunate in that they worked with a community of Jews whose lives revolved around a single relationship that grounded all the others. That, of course, was their relationship with God. Just as I can't help but pity Akiba, I have no trouble empathizing with the plight of the modern rabbis who look at their congregations without a clue as to how many members accept the existence of divinity, and how many scoff at the notion that a 21st century mind would still have room for such an idea. How is a rabbi supposed to connect with such a motley crew?

That was a trick question. The answer is quite simple. The rabbi is *supposed* to connect with them the same way s/he connects with all people. By approaching them as unique, dignified and interesting individuals. By honoring them with a concern about their personal needs and goals. In short, to use the words of Martin Buber, by encountering each of them as a "thou" and not as an "it." As far as how the rabbi encounters them as a *group* of individuals, the answer is that they as a group can surely use inspiration. So the rabbi must inspire by modeling for them what it means to be a Jew. To form Jewish relationships. And, most importantly, to form a relationship with the Holy One of Blessed Name. If enough members of the congregation cannot see for themselves what this relationship has done to nurture the rabbi's spirituality, or simply cannot stomach a notion as "antiquated" as divinity, then perhaps the rabbi should find another congregation. Or another line of work. But the rabbi shouldn't be worrying about adapting too much to the congregation. Rabbis are supposed to be leaders. Let them lead as hasids. Let the congregants follow as Jews.

The most moving thing I've ever heard from a rabbi in a synagogue reflected his relationship with God. Not surprisingly, given how little we know about God, it didn't involve the spoken word. I am referring to a night when an Israeli rabbi opened services by humming a number of melodies. Beautiful melodies, delivered with an obvious devotion to the One whom the rabbi allowed himself to encounter while the rest of us sat, spellbound by the intimacy of this meeting.

Those of us who commonly attend Jewish services are used to words from rabbis. Words in prayers, words in sermons. Sometimes, a rabbi's pride in crafting his words is palpable. But the night when the Israeli rabbi hummed, something else was palpable. As he hummed sounds

of devotion to God, we could feel his pride and his defense mechanisms leaving his body. Instead, the rabbi graced us by baring all. He was no longer a professional, a scholar, a man who made his mother proud. The “self” that remained was little more than a bundle of emotions – in this case, loving emotions – reaching out passionately to “the Other.”

What we in the congregation witnessed that night was an embrace without arms. Not a monologue, but a dialogue between a living being and Being itself. Wordless, but hardly meaningless. For out of such a dialogue, human values are born. Human inspiration is acquired. And a beloved who will never fail to be a beloved is cherished beyond measure.

Buber wrote that the God we encounter can only be experienced as a Thou, and not an It. But facing a crowd of educated, skeptical, modern minds, rabbis might give in to the pressure of considering God as an object of thought to be analyzed, and not as the Other whom we lovingly encounter. Fair enough, then. Let's consider God analytically, philosophically.

Even when Spinoza slew the deity of the Torah, he took pains not to disturb the belief that all of life is unified, or that the eternal Substance underlying all spatial and temporal forms may aptly be termed God. Hundreds of years later, Nietzsche hailed God's murder. But he did so essentially in the name of freedom, and the desire to avoid all commandments that didn't originate with one's own sovereign will. Nietzsche was hardly willing to give up his sense of the eternal beauty and unity in life, or the value of heading for the highest peak and embracing that beauty with all one's heart. For both of these famous heretics – and, I suspect, for most present-day atheists – the real enemy is not divinity per se, but a particular, narrow conception of it. A conception based in anthropomorphism, in the desire to view all of reality as a human-like creation, the product of the ideal father.

Those rabbis who wish to reach the modern Jewish mind may wish to put aside the notion of the ideal father and instead remember exactly how they came to encounter divinity in the first place. This relationship commonly starts with emotions of awe and wonder. And the sense that present in this world, there exists not only the egos of earthly creatures, but an intelligence that transcends our wildest imagination. This intelligence may be experienced as “the Other,” or perhaps it could be viewed as “the deepest Self.” More fruitfully, it should be viewed as the union of both of these concepts.

Jews who encounter God may do so without any concern that they are somehow deluding themselves or being – how should we put it? – philosophically incorrect. Divinity is a broad enough notion that the God encountered by a sage might have little if anything in common with the anthropomorphized deity that is summoned by a fundamentalist. The latter answers to the name of Father – and He usually answers in very clear verbal dictates, even printed ones. The former answers too, sometimes in that soft still voice we experience from deep within our souls, but usually the answers are non-verbal. They might take the form of a signal to fully experience a human face, or a babbling brook. Recognition of God might also take the form of a seemingly inexplicable feeling of bliss. Then again, the God encountered by a sage may further answer through the crematoria of Auschwitz or the iron combs of ancient Rome. Those, too, are answers. It is left to the sage to determine precisely what they signify.

Sprinkled throughout our world today are rabbis who do justice to the term hasid. They are pious men and women, deeply in love with God. And they are also resourceful, so they find their Beloved God wherever they can, which is essentially everywhere. When they seem so blessed to encounter another person, they are merely recognizing in that person the presence of God. Ditto for the gentle way that they might relate to an animal. Even though the Torah said nothing about that creature being made in God's image, the hasid rarely misses an opportunity to recognize the Beloved that grounds all of their joy in life.

Traditionally, to be a Jew is to recognize in oneself the potential to be a hasid. Once, we even had the chutzpah to consider ourselves a “people of priests.” Can you imagine? A people of muses? That's the standard that we set for ourselves as a community. And the vigil began long, long ago.

We as individuals might find it intimidating to aim so high. Who are we to be muses? We have enough trouble in eking out our own relationship with God. How can we possibly inspire others? Perhaps we should think about that often-mocked concept of traditional religion: the notion that we as Jews must above all “*obey*”? Look at the Latin root of that word, and you will see that to obey means simply to listen, to hear. To be a Jew is to be wide awake, with ears open, listening to everything that is worth hearing. Perhaps we do tend to associate with God more of the beautiful sounds than the discordant ones. But when we do so, we ought not forget that God is omnipresent, and the cause of all – the *bad* as well as the good. Jews shouldn't delude themselves to the contrary. There is no need to sugar coat. There is a need only to obey. To listen. To watch. To love.

This is a religion worth preserving. If we maintain our vigils, we shouldn't have to worry about intermarriage statistics or even anti-Semites threatening the gates. The value of the religion will speak for itself. In our words. And on our faces.