MIDSTREAM

A Monthly Jewish Review

OCTOBER, 1982 VOLUME XXVIII, No. 8

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Observers of the American Jewish scene agree that an important change has taken place in the last 10 years. There is talk of a "Jewish revival," "a reawakening of American Jewish life," and a "revitalization of Jewish tradition." Orthodox Judaism claims to be gaining strength, its ranks swelled by, according to one estimate, "tens of thousands" of *baale teshuva*, Jews who adopt the lifestyle of the faithful. At least one Jewish journalist predicts that we are living in an "apocalyptic time."

Hyperbole notwithstanding, American Judaism really has undergone a transformation. Many remain unaffected; some recoil in horror. Still, across the spectrum of Jewish life new interest in tradition and ritual manifests itself. To take just an example, the General Assembly of the Council of Jewish Federations, the largest annual convention of Jews in America, now serves only kosher food, making it perhaps the largest catered kosher affair in the world. In addition, skullcaps, blessings, and traditional singing give the gathering the air of an old fashioned family *simcha* — which may help explain its ever-growing popularity. Witnessing this now annual ritual, one easily forgets how just a few years ago many Jewish charities trumpeted "non-sectarian Judaism," and numbered among their leaders men and women who, in Oscar Janowsky's words, "equated Jewish learning and lore with fanaticism and ignorance . . . [and] regarded the abandonment of Jewish habits and ideas as prerequisite to cultured living."[1]

Today, Jewish education stands as a community priority, Jewish centers stress religious ceremonies and culture, and Jewish "habits and ideas" have acquired a new respectability, even in formerly secularist ranks. What Jonathan Woocher calls "Civil Judaism" — Judaism that is committed to Jewish group survival, sees Jewish existence as the fulfillment of a mission, and calls for Jews to exemplify ethical values — bears many more hallmarks of tradition than anyone could have predicted just two decades ago.

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In the major Jewish religious movements, the same transformation can be seen. A new series of pamphlets by Daniel B. Syme, "highlighting the why and how of Jewish living in the home" reflects developments that have taken place in Reform Jewish circles. The guides aim specifically at encouraging ritual observance; they are a far cry from old Union of American Hebrew Congregation pamphlets devoted to such ponderous topics as "The Faith and Message of the Prophets," "Jewish Ethics," and "The Universal Lord." In Reform Judaism today one encounters Jews who pray with heads covered and shoulders draped in a *talis*, Jews who observe dietary laws, and Jews who strictly observe the Sabbath. Classical Reform, with its disdain for tradition and neglect of ritual, claims fewer and fewer adherents.

Conservative Judaism displays a similar return to tradition. At the Jewish Theological Seminary, a whole group of students sport beards, keep their heads covered, and worship regularly in a nearby Orthodox synagogue. In the movement as a whole, an increasing number of children, trained in Solomon Schechter schools and Camp Ramah, seek greater observance in their lives, and turn either to small prayer fellowships or to Left-Wing Orthodoxy. Among young married children of Conservative rabbis, according to a recent study by Charles Liebman, two join an Orthodox synagogue for every five who remain Conservative.

While others move toward Orthodoxy (actually toward "orthopraxy"; full doctrinal commitment is hard to find even among those who have always identified as Orthodox), Orthodoxy itself has not been standing still. Samuel C. Heilman, one of the most perceptive students of modern Orthodoxy, points out that the current American religious revival has shown Orthodox Jews that they can be "far more blatantly Orthodox and parochial than before without losing [their] share in the contemporary world."[2] As a result, interest in traditional yeshivas (Talmudic academies) has soared. The number of *mikvaot* (ritual baths) increased annually. Headcoverings — skullcaps for men, wigs or babushkas for women — are no longer an uncommon sight in major cities. And ultra-Orthodox attacks on non-Orthodox Jews have become more open and virulent. Jews who once insisted that their Orthodoxy was an

intensely private affair have in recent years gone public. In some cases, they also have begun to solicit new recruits.

The new recruits, whether called born-again Jews, *baale teshuva*, or merely BTs, form the most visible component of the contemporary Jewish revival. They are, according to Yaakov Jacobs, the editor of *Jewish Life*, "the 'big story' of our time,"[3] and not surprisingly they have received considerable notice. A great many Jews know personally at least one man or woman who, to the astonishment of parents and friends, "took up religion." Rabbis, particularly in larger Jewish cities and on college campuses, see these *nouveau religieux* regularly. Now there are schools and specially prepared individuals who cater to their needs exclusively. At least 1,000 American *baale teshuva* are estimated to be studying in Israeli yeshivas, surrounded by other *baale teshuva*, and far away from secular influences and relatives who might lead them astray. Others study in America, many of them in yeshivas distant from their homes.

There are, however, many *baale teshuva* who study in no yeshiva and do not affiliate with Orthodoxy. Instead, they satisfy their spiritual quests in Reform or Conservative Judaism which for the first time they begin to observe in thoroughgoing and at least semi-traditional fashion. Whereas Orthodox *baale teshuva* turn for guidance to the *Shulkhan Arukh* (Joseph Karo's 16th-century code of Jewish law), their Conservative and Reform counterparts are more likely to turn to *The Jewish Catalogues, The Jewish Almanac*, or a plethora of other "How To" and "What Does Judaism Say About" manuals — all of which offer "proven formulas" for a meaningful Jewish life. For some these suffice. Having reacquainted themselves with "tradition," added ritual dimensions to their lives, and armed themselves with "holy books," they feel reborn enough. Those who seek more proceed to in-depth study of Jewish texts: on their own, in groups, in Israel, or in Conservative and Reform rabbinical schools. Often they join hands with the most traditional elements in their movements, lending added weight to the general revitalization of tradition in the community as a whole.

Other variations on today's *teshuva* theme find expression in the lives of the famous. Bob Dylan became interested in Orthodoxy for a while and even studied at a yeshiva. Then he became a born-again Christian — a transition which underlines the functional similarities between these two movements. Barbra Steisand returned to Orthodoxy because she found there "a sense of tranquility, far removed from the fast-paced glitter of Hollywood that has so often put her life in turmoil." She did not take upon herself a full Orthodox lifestyle, but rather, like many *baale teshuva*, became devoted to a single Orthodox figure: Rabbi Daniel Lapin. He offered her leadership, guidance, and peace of mind, serving as a surrogate father. "She's told me that studying her religion takes her back to her childhood," Lapin explained recently to the *Ladies Home Journal*. "And what's important to her is that she rediscover the father she lost when she was just a small child." Rabbi Lapin has assumed the functions of Barbra Streisand's psychoanalyst. She schedules one two-hour session with him every week.

The return to Judaism of Paul Cowan, a well-known writer for the *Village Voice*, similarly focused on a single Orthodox figure for leadership and guidance. In Cowan's case too this involved an unresolved relationship with his father and his past. But though he genuinely came to love traditional Judaism, as did his Christian wife, who eventually converted, Judaism remained for him a sometime affair. Like hallucinogenic drugs, it put him — but only temporarily — into some wonderfully other world:

> So I was Saul Cohen with Rabbi Singer and his friends, Paul Cowan in my own world. I began to feel as if I were leading a double life. When I was on the Lower East Side, in the year 5738 [1978], I always put on a yarmulke. . . . Sometimes, when I got off the subway on the Upper West Side, I would pause before I took the yarmulke off. I always removed it, though, always emerged from the subway bareheaded.[4]

Cowan and those like him might be termed schizophrenic *baale teshuva*. Enchanted by their new-found Jewish tradition, they nevertheless also find it necessary to live and work in the modern world. Having discovered the lost world of their grandparents, they must also confront their grandparents' preoccupying dilemma: how to live in two worlds at once. They attempt to resolve it by compartmentalizing their lives, taking on two names, two identities, two sets of friends. What they fail to realize is that theirs is not a solution. It is at best an escape, at worst a disease.

The most notable *baale teshuva*, the ones who define the stereotype, are not the schizophrenics but rather those who have seemingly moved 180 degrees from utter assimilation to total commitment. Typical examples, described in Orthodox publications, include "Arnold" whose "previous experience in Jewish education was limited to a three year stint at a Talmud Torah prior to his bar mitzvah. His mother is Jewish and . . . his father is not." Then there is "Jack," who grew up in a "Zionist but not religious household," quit "the world of Hebrew schools, rabbis and synagogues" at age 13, and became a "leftist, idealistic student" opposed to war and prejudice. Several *baale teshuva* admit to being refugees from Jews for Jesus, the drug culture, or Oriental cults. Many hold higher degrees, and display great familiarity with secular learning.

Rarely do people like these wander into Jewish institutions on their own. According to Hanoch Teller,

"the majority of the ranks of the *baale teshuva* yeshivas have been filled by recruits who were carefully attracted by talented solicitors — 'shleppers.'"[5] "Shleppers" are nothing less than Jewish missionaries (to fellow Jews), who carry out their task in the time-tested manner. The Western Wall, the streets of Jerusalem, and college campuses are their principal haunts where they scan the crowd looking for lost or troubled Jewish souls in need of warm embracing. Introductions soon give way to invitations: come for a meal, spend Sabbath with my family, sit in on a class, try on a pair of *tefilin*. The shlepper's approach is both experiential and intellectual; like Christian missionaries he mixes love with hard-hitting questions:

> "If I were a non-Jew and called you a dirty Jew, what would you do?"
> "I'd hit you."
> "Why? If you don't know what Judaism means, why get mad?"[6]

Rabbi Noach Weinberg, the charismatic founder and leader of several *baale teshuva* yeshivas, most recently Aish HaTorah (literally, Fire of the Torah) in the Old City of Jerusalem, solicits his students with more philosophical arguments:

> I asked the young man whether he believes in G-d.
> "No," he replied, "I'm an atheist."
> "An atheist? How fascinating! All my life I've been wanting to meet a genuine atheist — that is, someone who has systematically examined all the proofs of G-d's existence and has rejected them, one by one. Tell me, how did you accomplish this?"
> "Well — uh — not exactly. You see, I meant to say that I'm an agnostic."
> "Oh, an agnostic. You've decided that both the arguments for accepting a G-d and rejecting Him are equally inconclusive. That's some intellectual feat! Would you mind —?"
> "I don't think I meant that. What I really mean is that I don't know which is correct."
> "Oh, you don't know. That's different. Well then, you'd probably like to learn. Here's where we can help you."[7]

In America, shleppers come predominantly from the ranks of the Lubavitch movement, famed for its Chabad houses, mitzvah-mobiles, and campaigns to increase the level of observance in Jewish homes. "Outreach," however, is not confined to Lubavitch. Rabbi Moshe Feinstein, one of the leading figures in American Orthodoxy, has called on every yeshiva student to "spend one-tenth of his time working on behalf of others bringing them close to Torah." Without denying that "one must devote the major portion of his time to Torah study," Rabbi Feinstein insists that the needs of the hour call for students to "set Torah study aside and implement Torah action for G-d's sake." Responding to this challenge, Orthodox leaders in many American Jewish communities have set up advanced Talmudic academies (*kollelim*). They offer both community classes and lessons geared especially to those discovering their Judaism for the first time.[8]

While as individuals, *baale teshuva* have returned to Judaism in a variety of ways and for a myriad of personal reasons, the phenomenon that is today's American Jewish revival demands explanation of a broader sort. Why have so many different people suddenly and simultaneously concluded that traditional Judaism holds something of value to them? Believers insist that "Klal Yisrael [is] on the verge of *Geula* [salvation], and already experiencing the *Chevlai Moshiach* — the Pangs of Redemption." Cynics see the whole phenomenon as a temporary return to medievalism, an escape from reality. The Orthodox psychoanalyst Moshe Halevy Spero suggests that an archetypal "*pinteleh Yid*," a metaphysical Jewish homunculus that supposedly forms the "vital essence . . . indigenous to [a Jew's] personality . . . already present in the substrata of [his] psyche," has been awakened.[9]

But none of these explanations satisfy since they all fail to explain why the awakening occurred just in the 1970s, and they all fail to place the Jewish revival in the broader context of American religion. On the other hand, what some have called the first law of Jewish history — as go the Gentiles so go the Jews — does not seem to explain much either. To say that *baale teshuva* merely imitate born-again Christians is no more instructive than to explain the Christian revival as merely an imitation of the Islamic one. Clearly something more complicated is going on. While it is still too early to attempt a comprehensive explanation, three lines of inquiry do suggest themselves.

1. *Reaction to liberalism:* The Rightward swing of the nation as a whole explains one aspect of today's revival. Liberal experimenters, in religion no less than in politics, raised extravagant hopes which went unrealized. Abandonment of long cherished traditions and values did not, as promised, lead to higher truths, authentic religious experiences, or increased social consciousness. It simply left a void. Following the usual pattern, failed liberalism temporarily gave way to radicalism, the result being even greater religious experimentation using drugs, pagan rites, and Eastern forms of worship. But reaction was inevitable. Liberalism became the god that failed. Many now hope to find "authenticity" in the time-tested religious ways of their forebears.

This return to tradition is a mixed blessing. While it is a healthy brake on radical experimentation, tradition can also be invoked to stamp innovation out entirely. A recent headline in *The Jewish Observer* — "The Past Is Here to Stay (We Hope)" — unwittingly sums up the problem. Most Jews have no desire to bring back the past; it holds too many unpleasant memories. It may be amusing to watch weddings where the parents seem all-American, while their children look and sound as

though they just stepped off the boat. But American Jews must eventually face the fact that they can have no more success running backward in history than their parents had trying to outrun it entirely. Like it or not, tradition and change must somehow be held in a workable balance.

2. *A search for meaning, direction, and truth:* Rabbi Ralph Pelcovitz has rightly noted that many *baale teshuva*

> are young men and women who have found their lives devoid of values and lacking direction. Some have been with cults, others with drugs: they seek a safe harbor as well as some meaning and purpose for their lives. They are easily attracted to a religious leader who possesses a charismatic personality to whom they can cling and lean upon as a pillar of strength and support which they so desperately need. Their ready acceptance into a yeshiva or a group, with its warmth and sincerity, makes them feel welcomed and wanted.[10]

Politicians, activists, and other role models of the recent past have been tried and, as their truths proved false, found wanting. Now many are drawn to old-fashioned religious figures, particularly those seemingly resistant to the winds of change. These new leaders claim to reveal eternal truths which can never disappoint. They offer release from the torment of doubt, unhesitatingly provide guidance in managing day-to-day affairs, and hold out to the faithful the promise of a glorious future, thereby infusing the present with meaning and direction. They understand what seekers are looking for and strive to meet their demands.

This again is a mixed blessing. While many *baale teshuva* might have turned elsewhere had they not found spiritual sustenance in Judaism, the sustenance that they have found makes them party to some of the most lamentable features of contemporary society. For one thing, *baale teshuva* tend to be narcissistic: they come to Judaism hoping that it can do something personally for them. They select rabbis able to serve as their psychoanalysts, gurus, or father figures, to dispense wisdom and warmth. They care little about *Klal Yisrael* or Torah for its own sake. Some do subsequently learn to broaden their perspective, and become responsible members of the Jewish community. Many, alas, remain aloof: dependent on Judaism but expecting far more from it than they are prepared to give back.

Baale teshuva also tend to fall into fanaticism. Rather than mastering the intricacies of Jewish law — filled with infinite nuances and wondrous complexity — they too often content themselves with rote performance of commandments. Pelcovitz observes:

> It becomes a matter of obedience and imitation, hence they become pious before they become proficient in the fundamentals of Judaism. As a result, their religiosity is often quite immature and their scale of values unbalanced. They cannot as yet differentiate between fundamental Jewish law and practices which are of lesser weight . . . they are extremely — and at time overly — zealous and concerned about the minutiae of Jewish law. The flaw lies in their inability to be selective, to be free, to be natural and joyful in their observance of Judaism.

One might go even further. For many *baale teshuva*, fanaticism becomes a means both of suppressing doubt and of gaining acceptance. By displaying super-piety, they seek to prove that their conversion is complete, that they are just as committed to Yiddishkeit as any born adherent — if not more so.

3. *The assimilationism/traditionalism cycle:* Viewed from a different perspective, today's Jewish revival marks another turn in an ongoing historical cycle which sees Jews turning inward, outward, and back again. This love/hate relationship with the surrounding world is a recurring theme in Jewish history and nowhere more so than in America. Generally speaking, tolerance and the allure of secular culture drive Jews toward assimilation. Intolerance and fear of assimilation drive them back to tradition. The ongoing tension between the two outlooks constitutes a basic dynamic in American Jewish life.

The latest phase of Jewish involvement in the secular world peaked in the 1960s, when being Jewish seemed to mean being in favor of civil rights, social action, and interfaith dialogue, and opposed to big business, the military-industrial complex, and the Vietnam War. By the 1970s, following the Six-Day War, rising anti-Semitism, economic crises, energy shortages, and Communist expansionism, not one of these values held equal sway. Jews increasingly found themselves at odds with the secular world, and consequently turned inward. Revival followed.

The preceding analysis suggests that the current American Jewish revival may not last nearly as long as some Orthodox triumphalists believe. While there is an understandable tendency to project the present into the future, a glance at previous American Jewish revivals offers an alternative, more realistic perspective.

What the *London Jewish Chronicle* termed a "strong religious revival" set in among American Jews back in 1887.[11] Yeshivas Etz Chaim, the first traditional East European-style yeshiva in North America, had just opened its doors. At the same time, the Machzike Talmud Torah, an afternoon school for East European youngsters, stood bursting at the seams, parents clamoring to have their children admitted. Uptown, the Jewish Theological Seminary had just opened, its aim being "the preservation in America of the knowledge and practice of Historical Judaism." Soon a chief rabbi, Jacob Joseph, would be appointed in the hope that he would "unite and harmonize Jewish Orthodox Congregations in matters concerning Jews and Judaism."

The ensuing years saw other manifestations of revival. Synagogues proliferated, rabbis grew in number, yeshivas, Talmud Torahs, free schools, and Sunday

schools all mushroomed, and a decided shift took place toward greater traditionalism in Jewish life. Bernard Drachman, an American-born Reform Jew with degrees from Columbia University and Temple Emanu-El Theological Seminary changed his convictions and became an Orthodox rabbi. Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise severed his close ties with liberal Unitarians and prophesied that the "foolish" Hebrew Union College rabbis who "moved far away" from Judaism, in one case rejecting the sanctity of the Torah scroll, would "return," chastened by the experience of having "banged their heads" against a brick wall with "no road ahead of them."[12] Even Rabbi Kaufmann Kohler, son-in-law of the radical Reform leader, David Einhorn, moved to the Right. After years of support for the institution of the Sunday-Sabbath, an effort to make celebration of the Jewish day of rest conform to that of the non-Jewish one, he changed his mind. "Our duty today is to maintain our Jewish identity, and to preserve Jewish institutions without faltering, without yielding," he wrote in 1891; "we must . . . rally around our sacred Sabbath."[13]

Evidence thus pointed toward a full-fledged Jewish awakening across the spectrum of Jewish life. The rising tide of East European Jewish immigration turned many Jews inward, toward greater concern for their own community. The growth of anti-Semitism, both in Europe and in the United States, similarly led to a heightened sense of Jewish identity, while fanciful dreams of Jewish-Christian rapprochement turned to dust. Finally, the late 19th and early 20th centuries witnessed a growing evangelical mood within American Protestantism. Currents of liberalism were giving way to a conservative temper, partly in response to the changes wrought by immigration, urbanization, and industrialization. People of all faiths, Jews among them, seemed bent on returning to the time-tested ways of their forebears.

But though that is what seemed to be happening, in fact Judaism was merely going through a normal cycle of religious revitalization. Cultural crisis led to reaction. Reaction soon gave way to synthesis. Reform Judaism became increasingly tolerant of Zionism and began its long march back to tradition. Conservative Judaism, laying claim to the middle ground between tradition and change, grew explosively until it became the largest Jewish religious movement in America. Orthodoxy gave birth to Modern Orthodoxy, and it embraced synthesis as well. Yeshivas Etz Chaim, Machzike Talmud Torah, the chief rabbinate, and most of the other supposed "signs of the times" ultimately went the way of Jonah's famous gourd: here today, gone tomorrow.

The same cycle was repeated more recently in the early and middle 1950s. Those were the years of the Jewish building boom, when synagogue centers blossomed and membership figures grew apace. A reintensification of Jewish education took place, new Jewish periodicals appeared, and Will Herberg, Nathan Glazer, and Herbert J. Gans all tried their hand at understanding what was called at the time "The Jewish Revival in America."[14] No sooner was it described, however, then the revival ended. Again a new synthesis emerged, one which lay heavier emphasis than before on Jewish identity as defined by Zionism, the Holocaust, civil rights, and interfaith dialogue. But those who had looked for renewed synagogue growth or intense spiritual development were doomed to disappointment. Momentum generated by the revival flowed in other directions.

While the current revival differs in some respects from those that preceded it, history suggests that the general pattern, common to all revivals, will recur: "From the thesis and antithesis of the revival generation a new synthesis emerges. But the old light never quite dies, and the process is never finished."[15] The precise shape of the new American Jewish synthesis cannot yet be determined. All that can safely be predicted is that the new synthesis will both adhere to standard American norms and assimilate basic American values. Insularity and escapism cannot long hold sway among American Jews, for American Jews have always insisted on being *both* American and Jewish — tensions notwithstanding. Attempted syntheses follow one another in dreary succession, none ever succeeding entirely. But the craving for synthesis endures, and with it continues the endless search for a harmonious American Jewish identity. ■

Notes

1. *The JWB Survey* (New York, 1948), p. 241.
2. "Constructing Orthodoxy," *Society*, 15 (May-June, 1978), pp. 52–40.
3. *Jewish Life*, III:4 (Winter, 1979–80), p. 65.
4. *The Tribes of America* (Garden City: N.Y., Doubleday 1979), p. 245.
5. "How Do You Handle a Hungry Heart?" *The Jewish Observer* 14:9 (June 1980), p. 16.
6. Hillel Goldberg, "The Teshuva Solicitors," *The Jewish Observer*, 14:9 (June, 1980), p. 11.
7. "Launching a Teshuva Movement: 'It's Time to Go Professional,'" *The Jewish Observer* 12:6 (June, 1977), p. 16.
8. Moshe Feinstein, "A Time for Action," *The Jewish Observer* 9:4 (June 1973), pp. 5-6.
9. "Der Pinteleh Yid: An Archetype," *The Jewish Observer* 9:10 (March, 1974), p. 17.
10. "The Teshuva Phenomenon: The Other Side of the Coin," *Jewish Life* 4:3 (Fall, 1980), p. 16.
11. (London) *Jewish Chronicle*, March 11, 1887.
11. Z.H. Masliansky, *Memoirs* [in Hebrew] (New York, 1929), p. 193.
13. Quoted in Kerry Olitzky, "The Sunday-Sabbath Controversy in Judaism" (unpublished rabbinic thesis, Hebrew Union College, 1981), p. 59.
14. See *Commentary* (1955–56) and chapter seven of Glazer's *American Judaism* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press 1972).
15. William G. McLoughlin, *Revivals, Awakenings and Reform* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), p. 22.