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Why No New Judaisms in the Twentieth Century?

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Since Professor Hugh Nibley has served the scholarly community as a scholar of religion through the study of his specialty, it is appropriate to speak of religions through the study of another particular specialty. What I wish to explain in his honor is what conditions favor the formation of religious systems. This I do through particular attention to the condition of Judaism in the twentieth century, in which, for a long spell now, there has been no new Judaism. As we face the onset of a new age of *systemopoeia*, of the making of religious systems, in Judaism, with the renaissance of energy and faith so characteristic of contemporary Judaism, it is well to look back on the barren age now ended. I do so as an act of esteem and respect for a scholar of religion who, when he receives his audience, will be seen as one of the fecund intellects of the study of religion in our century.

The middle of the twentieth century—until practically our own time—has produced no important and influential Judaic systems. The well-established Judaisms that flourish today—Reform, Orthodoxy, Conservative Judaism—all took shape in the nineteenth century, and in Germany. From after the beginning of Reform Judaism at the start of

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the nineteenth century to the later twentieth century we identify three periods of enormous system-building in Judaism, or, to invent a word, Judaic *systemopoeia*. At each of these the manufacture of Judaic systems came into sharp focus: 1850-60 for the systems of Orthodoxy and the positive Historical School; and, for the secular Judaisms, 1890-1900 for Jewish Socialism and Zionism. So all of the Judaic systems came into being in the hundred years from 1800 to 1900: first Reform, then, some decades later, in the middle of the century, Orthodoxy and the Historical School; thereafter, again some decades later, at the end of the century, Zionism and Jewish Socialism. We therefore wonder how it is possible that one period produced a range of Judaic systems of depth and enormous breadth, which attracted mass support and persuaded many of the meaning of their lives, while the next three quarters of a century did not. And, further, what are we now to expect, on the eve of the twenty-first century? For I think we are on the threshold of another great age of *systemopoeia* in Judaism.¹

POLITICAL CHANGE AND SYSTEMIC INERTIA

Why no new Judaisms for so long? We may eliminate answers deriving from the mere accidents of political change; given the important shifts in the political circumstances of Israel, the Jewish people, we should have anticipated exercises in symbolic redefinition to accommodate the social change at hand. That is to say, the stimulus for system-building surely should have come from the creation of the Jewish state, an enormous event. Take the state of Israel, for example. The creation of the first Jewish state in two thousand years yielded nothing more interesting than a flag and a rather domestic politics, not a worldview and a way of life such as the founders of the American republic, Madison and Hamilton, enunciated, for example, and such as their contemporaries, Washington and Jeffer-

son, for instance, imagined that they constructed. State-building need not yield large visions and revisioning of everyday life and how it should be lived; in most cases it has not done so, though in the American case it did. In the Israeli case, it did not. But no Judaic systems have emerged there, only rehearsals and re-presentations of European ones. The rise of the state of Israel destroyed a system, the Zionist one, but replaced it with nothing pertinent to Jewry at large.

But American Jewry presents the same picture. Wars and dislocations, migration and relocation—these in the past stimulated those large-scale reconsiderations that generated and sustained system-building in Jews' societies. The political changes affecting Jews in America, who became Jewish Americans in ways in which Jews did not become Jewish Germans or Jewish Frenchmen or Englishmen or women, yielded no encompassing system. The Judaic system of Holocaust and Redemption leaves unaffected the larger dimensions of human existence of Jewish Americans—and that is part of its power. When we consider the strength, in the Judaisms of America, of Reform, Orthodoxy, and Historical or Conservative Judaism, each in its German formulation, we see the reality.

The Judaic systems of the nineteenth century have endured in America, none of them—until now—facing significant competition of scale. That means millions of people moved from one world to another, changed in language, occupation, and virtually every other significant social and cultural indicator—and produced nothing more than a set of recapitulations of three Judaic systems serviceable under utterly different circumstances. The failure of Israeli Jewry to generate system-building finds its match in the still more startling unproductivity of American Jewry. Nothing much has happened in either of the two massive communities of Israel in the twentieth century.

Political change should have precipitated fresh thought

and experiment, and Judaic systems should have come forth. So change of an unprecedented order yielded a rehearsal of ideas familiar only from other contexts. Israeli nationalism as a Jewish version of third-world nationalism, American Judaism as a Jewish version of a national cultural malaise on account of a lost war—these set forth a set of stale notions altogether. Let me now recapitulate the question, before proceeding to my answer: why no system-building for seventy-five years or so? And we come, then, to the reason for what is, in my judgment, the simple fact that, beyond World War I, Judaic system-building (with the possible exception of the system of Judaic reversion) has come to an end.

WHY NO NEW JUDAIC SYSTEMS FOR SEVENTY-FIVE YEARS?

I see three pertinent factors to explain why no Judaic systems have come forth since the end of the nineteenth century. I do not claim that these factors are sufficient. But I think they are necessary to answer the question before us.

The Holocaust

The demographic factor comes in two parts. First, the most productive sector of world Jewry perished. Second, the conditions that put forth the great systemic creations vanished with the six million who died. Stated as naked truth, not only too many (one is too many!), but the wrong Jews died. What I mean is that Judaic systems in all their variety emerged in Europe, not in America or in what was then Palestine and is now the state of Israel, and within Europe they came from Central and Eastern European Jewry. We may account for the *systemopoeia* of Central and Eastern European Jews in two ways. First, the Jews in the East, in particular, formed a vast population with enormous learning and diverse interests. Second, the systems

of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries arose out of a vast population that lived in self-aware circumstances, not scattered and individual but composed and bonded. The Jews who perished formed enormous and self-conscious communities of vast intellectual riches.

To them, being Jewish constituted a collective enterprise, not an individual predilection. In the West, the prevailing attitude of mind identifies religion with belief to the near-exclusion of behavior, and religion tends to identify itself with faith; so religion is understood as a personal state of mind or an individual's personal and private attitude. So the Judaic systems that took shape beyond 1900 exhibit that same Western bias not for society but self, not for culture and community but conscience and character. Under such circumstances *systemopoeia* hardly flourishes, for systems speak of communities and create worlds of meaning, answer pressing public questions, and produce broadly self-evident answers. This can be seen in the contrast between the circumstance of reversionary systems of Judaisms, which involves individuals "coming home" one by one, with the context of the ideological Judaic systems, all of them, in fact, mass movements and Jewish idiomatic statements of still larger mass movements. The demographic fact, then, speaks for itself. I do not know whether one can specify a particular demographic (and not merely intellectual) base necessary for the foundation of a given Judaic system. As I said, the reversionary systems demand a demographic base of one person, but Zionist and Socialist systems, millions. Yet everyone who has traced the history of Judaic systems in modern and contemporary times has found in the mass populations of Central and Eastern Europe the point of origin of nearly all systems. That fact then highlights our original observation that the period of the preparation for, then the mass murder of, European Jewry from the later 1930s to the mid-1940s, marked the

end of Judaic *systemopoeia*. We cannot, then, underestimate the impact of the destruction of European Jewry.

One of the as-yet-untallied costs of the murder of six million Jews in Europe therefore encompasses the matter of system-building. The destruction of European Jewry in Eastern and Central Europe brought to an end for a very long time the great age of Judaic system construction and explains the paralysis of imagination and will that has left the Jews to forage in the detritus of an earlier age: rehearsing other peoples' answers to other peoples' questions. Indeed, I maintain that until Judaic system-builders come to grips with the full extent of the effects of the "Holocaust," they will do little more than recapitulate a world now done with, for the systems before us answered the questions urgent to European Jewry in its situation in the nineteenth and earlier twentieth centuries—those questions, not others.

Yet the demographic issue by itself cannot suffice. For today's Jewish populations produce massive communities, three hundred thousand here, half a million there, and there are, after all, both American Judaism and Israeli nationalism to testify to the possibilities of system-building even beyond the mass murder of European Jewry. When we consider, moreover, the strikingly unproductive character of large populations of Jews, the inert and passive character of ideology (such as it is) in the Jewries of France, Britain, South Africa, and the Soviet Union, for instance, in which, so far as the world knows, no Judaic systems have come forth—no worldviews joined to definitions of a way of life capable of sustaining an Israel, a society—the picture becomes clear. Even where there are populations capable of generating and sustaining distinctive Judaic systems, none is in sight. So we have to point to yet another factor, which, as a matter of fact, proves correlative with the first, the loss of European Jewry.

The Demise of Intellect

What we noticed about the Judaic systems of the twentieth century—their utter indifference to the received writings of the Judaism of the dual Torah (i.e., oral and written Torah)—calls our attention to the second explanation for the end of *systemopoeia*. It is the as-yet-unappreciated factor of sheer ignorance, the profound pathos of Jews' illiteracy in all books but the book of the streets and marketplaces of the day. That second factor, the utter loss of access to that permanent treasury of the human experience of Jewry preserved and handed on in the canonical Torah, has already impressed us: the extant raw materials of system-building now prove barren and leached.

The Judaisms that survive provide ready access to emotional or political encounters, readily available to all—by definition. But they offer none to that confrontation of taste and judgment, intellect and reflection, that takes place in traditional cultures and with tradition: worlds in which words matter. People presently resort mainly to the immediately accessible experiences of emotions and of politics. We recall that the systems of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries made constant reference to the Judaism of the dual Torah, at first intimate, later on merely by way of allusion and rejection. The nineteenth-century systems drew depth and breadth of vision from the received Judaism of the dual Torah, out of which they produced—by their own word—variations and continuations. So the received system and its continuators realized not only the world of perceived experience at hand. They also made accessible the alien but interesting human potentialities of other ages, other encounters altogether with the potentialities of life in society. The repertoire of human experience in the Judaism of the dual Torah presents as human options the opposite of the banal, the one-dimensional, the immediate. Jews received and used the heritage of

human experience captured, as in amber, in the words of the dual Torah. So they did not have to make things up fresh every morning or rely only on that small sector of the range of human experience immediately accessible and near at hand.

By contrast, Israeli nationalism and the American Judaism of Holocaust and Redemption—the two most influential systems that move Jews to action in the world today—scarcely concern themselves with that Judaism. They find themselves left only with what is near at hand. They work with the raw materials made available by contemporary experience—emotions on the one side, politics on the other. Access to realms beyond requires learning in literature, the only resource for human experience beyond the immediate. But the Judaic systems of the twentieth century, except for the reversionary Judaisms, do not resort to the reading of books as a principal act of their way of life, in the way in which the Judaism of the dual Torah and its continuators did and do. The consequence is a strikingly abbreviated agenda of issues, a remarkably one-dimensional program of urgent questions.

In this regard the reversionary systems point toward a renewed engagement with the canon and system of the dual Torah, but consequently I think those systems prove (quite properly) transitory and preparatory: ways back to “Sinai.” So their very definitive characteristic points toward what has *not* happened: a systematic exploitation, by system-builders working out an original and urgent program of questions and answers, of the received Judaism of the dual Torah. The reason for neglect is the self-evident fact that the Jews of the world today, especially in France and elsewhere in Western Europe, the Soviet Union, and the United States, but also in Canada, Australia, South Africa, Argentina, Brazil, and other areas of sizable demographic consequence, in point of fact have lost all access to the Judaism of the dual Torah that sustained fifteen

centuries of Jews before now. The appeal to contemporary experience, whether in emotions or in politics, draws upon not so rich a treasury of reflection and response to the human condition. And the utter failure of imagination, the poverty of contemporary system-building where it takes place at all, shows the result. From a mansion Israel has moved into a hovel. Jews in the European, African, and Australian worlds no longer regard "being Jewish" as a matter of intellect at all, and so far as they frame a world-view for themselves, it bears few points of intersection with the Judaic canon.

One reason that Judaic systems did not emerge in the American Judaic setting derives from the astounding failure of education to transmit to the bulk of Jewry in America the received system in any accessible form. American Jewry denied itself access to the resources on which other Jewish communities had drawn, that is, the canon of the Judaism of the dual Torah, and attempted to create a domestic Judaism resting on experiences no one had undergone or would want to. It has virtually no school system for fully half of its children, and most of the other half receive an education of slight consequence. So Jewish Americans have neither studied Torah nor closely reflected on their own lives in a free society.

They have opted for neither the worst of one world nor the best of another. That is, they focused such imaginative energies as they generated upon "the Holocaust," and they centered their eschatological fantasies on "the beginning of our redemption" in the state of Israel. But they had not gone through the one nor chosen to participate in the other. Not having lived through the mass murder of European Jewry, American Jews restated the problem of evil in unanswerable form and then transformed that problem into an obsession. Not choosing to settle in the state of Israel, moreover, American Jews further defined redemption, the resolution of the problem of

evil, in terms remote from their world. One need not look far to find the limitations of the system of American Judaism: its stress on a world other than the one in which the devotees in fact were living. As to the reversionary Judaisms of the hour, it is too soon to tell what they will yield or how they will endure. By nature transient; by doctrine alien to the canonical system they allege, they merely recapitulate; and by program of deed separate from the world to which they allegedly propose to gain access, they have yet to show us how, and whether, they will last. That is what I mean by failure of intellect.

The Triumph of Large-Scale Organization

Third and distinct from the other two is the bureaucratization of Jewry in consequence of the tasks it rightly has identified as urgent. To meet the problems Jews find self-evidently urgent, they have had to adopt a way of life of building and maintaining and working through very large organizations and institutions. The contemporary class structure of Jewry therefore places in positions of influence Jews who place slight value on matters of intellect and learning and that same system accords no sustained hearing to Jews who strive to reflect. The tasks, instead, are those that call forth other gifts than those of heart and mind. The exemplary experiences of those who exercise influence derives from politics, through law, from economic activity, through business, from institutional careers, through government, industry, and the like. As the gifts of establishing routine take precedence over the endowments of charisma of an intellectual order, the experiences people know and understand – politics, emotions of ready access – serve, also, for the raw materials of Judaic system-building. Experiences that, in a Judaic context, people scarcely know, do not so serve. This I take to be yet another consequence of the ineluctable tasks of the twentieth century: to build large-scale organizations to

solve large-scale problems. Organizations, in the nature of things, require specialization. The difference between the classes that produce systemic change today and those who created systems in the nineteenth and earlier twentieth centuries then proves striking. What brought it about, if not the great war conducted against the Jews, beginning not in 1933 but with the organization of political anti-Semitism joined to economic exclusion, from the 1880s onward. So in a profound sense the type of structure now characteristic of Jewry represents one of the uncounted costs of the Holocaust.

Intellectuals, today no longer needed, create systems. Administrators do not; and when they need ideas, they call for propaganda and hire publicists and journalists. When we remember that all of the Judaic systems of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries derive from intellectuals, we realize what has changed. Herzl was a journalist, for instance, and those who organized Jewish Socialism and brought Yiddishism all wrote books. The founders of the system of Reform Judaism were mainly scholars, rabbis, writers, and other intellectuals. It is not because they were lawyers that the framers of the positive Historical School produced the historicistic system that they made. The emphases of Hirsch and other creators of Orthodoxy lay on doctrine, and all of them wrote important books and articles of a reflective and even philosophical character. So much for Reform, Orthodox, Conservative, Socialist-Yiddishist, and Zionist systems: the work of intellectuals, one and all.

THE UNCOUNTED COST OF THE HOLOCAUST

These three factors—demographic, cultural, institutional and bureaucratic—scarcely exhaust the potential explanation for the long span of time in which, it would appear, Jews have brought forth few Judaic systems, re-

lying instead on those formed in a prior and different age and circumstance. But I do think all of them will figure in any rigorous account of what has happened, and has not happened, in the present century. And they point directly or indirectly to the extraordinary price yet to be exacted from Jewry on account of the murder of six million Jews in Europe. The demographic loss requires no comment, and the passage of time from the age in which the Judaism of the dual Torah predominated has already impressed us. Those causes are direct and immediate.

But the correlation between mass murder and an exemplary leadership of lawyers and businessmen and politicians and generals demands explanation. Administrators, not intellectuals, bureaucrats, or charismatic thinkers, formed the cadre of the hour. In an age in which, to survive at all, Jews had to address the issues of politics and economics, build a state (in the state of Israel) and a massive and effective set of organizations capable of collective political action (in the United States), not sages but *politicians* in the deepest sense of the word, namely, those able to do the work of the polity, alone could do what had to be done. And they did come forward. They did their task, as well as one might have hoped. The time therefore demanded gifts other than those prized by intellectuals. And the correlation between mass murder and a culture of organizations proves exact: the war against the Jews called forth from the Jews people capable of building institutions to protect the collectivity of Israel, so far as anyone could be saved. Consequently much was saved. But much was lost.

Celebrating the victory of survival, we should not lose sight of the cost. Determining the full cost of the murder of the six million Jews of Europe will require a long time. The end of the remarkable age of Judaic *systemopoeia* may prove a more serious charge against the future, a more calamitous cost of the destruction of European Jewry, than

anyone has yet realized. The gas chambers suffocated not merely Jews, but spirit too.

JUDAIC SYSTEMS: THE CORPORATE MODEL

The banality of survival forms a counterpoint to the banality of evil: in an age of the common, why look for distinction in Jewry? People draw upon only their experience of emotions, inside, and politics, without. They then assign themselves the central position in the paradigm of humanity, seeing what they are as all they can become. But we need not find that surprising. Who does otherwise, except for those with eyes upon a long past, a distant future: a vision? The system-builders, the intellectuals, book-readers, book-writers, truth-tellers—these are the ones who appeal to experience of the ages as precedent for the hour. This characterized all the Judaic systems born in the death of the received one: whether Reform theologians invoked the precedent of change or Orthodox ones of Sinai. Today there are no system-builders, so we can scarcely ask for the rich perspectives, the striking initiatives, that yield compelling systems of life and thought. But whence the nullities that have taken the place of the system-builders? And how come the banality of the Judaic systems of the hour?

The twentieth century presented to Jews the necessity to create large bureaucracies to deal with large problems. In the nature of things, individuals, participants in systems of belief and behavior, had sought explanations for what they themselves did. Now the place for the individual was his or her own place: a part of the task, not the entirety of it. It is no accident that system-building came to an end in the encounter with an age of large Jewish organizations: armies and governments in the state of Israel and enormous instruments of fund-raising and politics in America. The resentment of intellectuals, no longer needed, should

not allow ready rejection of their observation. The lawyers and administrators and managers who have succeeded the intellectuals did not build systems, because they built something else, and what they could build was what the hour required—the last, most awful charge exacted by the Holocaust from the survivors.

So let us dwell on this matter of the building by specialists of large organizations. Such specialization in modern times meant that systems required their elite (the specialists) and relegated all others to a life essentially at the fringes of the system. Every Judaist in a Judaic system of the dual Torah said prayers on his own (women were not given the same task). But Zionists who attended meetings did not do the same thing as did the Zionists who built the land, for example. Specialization as part of the construction of a rational system, a calling expressed in a particularity of work—these characterize organization, that is, collective action, in modern times. And all the Judaic systems of the twentieth century conformed to the requirements of organization in that age: all formed, as I said, systems of organization, meaning specialization for all, but then the doing of the distinctive work of the system by only a few. The specialized work of organizations demanded from all their renunciation of a role in the general scheme of the system.

In so stating, of course, I draw upon the image of the iron cage of Max Weber.² Weber alludes to the “iron cage” in the following famous passage: “The care for external goods should only lie on the shoulders of the saint like a light cloak, which can be thrown aside at any moment, but fate decreed that the cloak should become an iron cage.” What he says—in a justly famous passage of enormous power—about economic action applies equally to the sort of large-scale systemic, existential behavior to which we refer when we speak of a Judaism characterized by the following:

Where the fulfillment of the calling cannot directly be related to the highest spiritual and cultural values, . . . the individual generally abandons the attempt to justify it at all. . . . No one knows who will live in this cage in the future. . . . For of the last stage of this cultural development, it might well be truly said: Specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart; this nullity imagines that it has attained a level of civilization never before achieved.³

The point of intersection with organizations in the twentieth century I locate at the reference to “specialists without spirit.” When we note the division of labor that has rendered a mockery of the category of a way of life joined to a worldview, we understand why we cannot define a distinctive way of life associated with a given worldview.

When I describe the worldview of a movement, in the nineteenth century I allude to an encompassing theory that explains a life of actions in a given and very particular pattern. When I speak of the worldview of a movement of the twentieth century, I refer to the explanation of why people, in a given, distinctive circumstance, should do pretty much what everyone is doing somewhere, under some equivalent circumstance: an army is an army anywhere, but study of the Torah is unique to Israel. Anyone can join a union, and why invoke a Judaic worldview to explain why to join a Jewish union? I know only that Judaic worldviews did offer such an explanation and made a great difference to those to whom that explanation answered an urgent question. What has changed? I find the answer in the history of Western civilization. The processes that shaped the Judaic systems of modern and contemporary times form part of the larger movement of humanity—a distinctive and therefore exemplary part to be sure. Let me specify what I think has made all the difference.

The critical Judaic component of the Christian civili-

zation of the West spoke of God and God's will for humanity, what it meant to live in God's image, after God's likeness. So said the Judaism of the dual Torah, so said Christianity in its worship of God made flesh. So that message of humanity in God's image, of a people seeking to conform to God's will, found resonance in the Christian world as well: both components of the world, the Christian dough, the Judaic yeast, bore a single message about humanity. The first century beyond the Christian formulation of the West, that is, the twentieth century, spoke of class and nation, not one humanity in the image of one God. Calling for heroes, it demanded sacrifice not for God but for state. When asked what it meant to live with irreconcilable difference, the century responded with total war on civilians in their homes, made foxholes. Asked to celebrate the image of humanity, the twentieth century created an improbable likeness of humanity: mountains of corpses, the dead of the Somme of World War I and of Auschwitz of World War II and all the other victims of the state that took the place of church and synagogue, even up to the third of the population of the Khmer killed by their own government, and the half of the world's Armenians by what, alas, was theirs,—and the Jews, and the Jews, and the Jews.

The first century found its enduring memory in one man on a hill, on a cross, the twentieth, six million making up a Golgotha—a hill of skulls—of their own. No wonder then that the Judaisms of the age struggled heroically to frame a Judaic system appropriate to the issues of the age—and failed. Who would want to have succeeded to frame a worldview congruent to such an age, a way of life to be lived in an age of death? And no wonder—if I may pass my opinion—that the Judaisms of the age proved transient and evanescent. For, I like to think no Judaic system could ever have found an enduring fit with an age such as the one that, at the turning of the century, draws to a close.

The age of reversionary Judaisms, dawning at the first light of the century beyond, forms the right, the hopeful epitaph on the Judaisms of the dying century. They had formed Judaisms that, to Israel, the Jewish people, struggled to speak of hope and of life in the valley of the darkest shadows. But they had to fail, and their failure forms their vindication. For the Jews are a people that never could find a home in the twentieth century. That, in the aspect of eternity, may prove the highest tribute God will pay to those whom God among humanity first chose.⁴

THE END OF THE JUDAISMS OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

But I think the impact of the Holocaust has run its course. While the events will never pass from our hearts, the power of those events to form a system is pretty well exhausted by the Judaism of Holocaust and Redemption. And that Judaism, for a variety of reasons, is losing its hold. First, it stresses negative experiences, on which people find they cannot raise their children. Second, it focuses upon the world beyond, not the life within, and people turn to a Judaism to guide their lives together, not their public policy toward the outside world. Third, the Judaism of Holocaust and Redemption appeals, for the redemptive myth, to the creation of the state of Israel. But that event has now lost its power to surprise and enchant. The state of Israel is an important fact of Jewish existence, which most of us celebrate every day. It is not the object of wonder and awe that it was forty years ago, nor should it be. In all, we have outgrown the events of World War II and its aftermath. And that is as it should be: generations do pass.

But among the five great Judaisms of the first third of the twentieth century, none retains vitality, and all have lost nerve. Jewish Socialism cum Yiddishism is a victim of the Holocaust. Zionism achieved fulfillment and has no

important message that Israelism within the complex of the Judaism of Holocaust and Redemption fails to present. Conservative, Reform, and Orthodox Judaisms all have lost out, Conservatism because of a failure of purpose, Reform because of a failure of nerve, and Orthodoxy because of a failure of intellect.

Conservative Judaism struggles to find room in the vital center that it created, for everyone wants a place there. Reform Judaism, having sold its soul to the Judaism of Holocaust and Redemption, has lost the source of its energy and power in the prophetic tradition of Judaism. Western Orthodoxy answered questions about living by the Torah in Western society that few seem to wish to ask anymore. Those who want tradition and also a place in an open society – the question that Hirsch answered in nineteenth-century Germany – find it in a variety of Judaisms. The diverse Orthodoxies now concur, with the exception of the minority around Yeshiva University, that to be Orthodox is to live a life of segregation and scarcely veiled hostility to the rest of the world of Judaism, not to mention to goyim. Accordingly, everyone wants a place in the center.

The single most powerful idea in modern and contemporary Judaic life is the ideal we now identify with Conservative Judaism. All but a few extremists on the fringes of far-out Reform and Orthodoxy share that ideal, and, for the Jewish lay people, it is the one thing on which most concur. That ideal is that we wish to be Judaic in an integrated society, and that we want our Judaism to infuse our lives as Americans with meaning. That is a mediating, a healing, a centrist and moderate definition. Clearly, most Jews in America wish to live like other Americans and not in conditions of a ghetto. Equally obviously, most Jews in America wish to remain distinctively Jewish, with traits that join them together and distinguish them from others. And, the third truism, most Jews in America look to the

Judaic religious tradition for guidance on how to be different—but not too different.

And that is the centrist position. It defines the tensions and limits of the vital center. We look to tradition for guidance, but we make up our own minds—that is one way of stating matters. We want to live by something we call “Judaism,” but we want to accept the possibility of change and modification where appropriate, where necessary, where desirable (thus, modern Orthodoxy, Conservative, Reform). The alternative positions are those of self-segregation, which requires no change in whatever is perceived to be “the tradition,” and total assimilation, which permits no point of difference with “everybody else” (if there is an “everybody else”).

Now that I have outlined what I think is the basic conviction of the vital center, readers probably recognize two facts. First of all, in simple terms, I have spelled out the social policy of the Conservative Movement in Judaism. It is what Conservative Judaism represents to us. Second, I also have outlined views that equally well characterize much of Orthodox and most of Reform and Reconstructionist Judaisms as well. And that is my point: Conservative Judaism is only one of the many center-movements in contemporary American Judaism, and while its centrist position enjoys enormous appeal and power (as I believe it should), it is the position that matters, not the institution.

The institutions of Conservative Judaism, as distinct from the ideology of the vital center, are weak. They do not enjoy the financial support of the lay people. Much of the Conservative rabbinate is alienated. Many of the people in charge treat with disdain and scorn the movement “out there” and regard as their private park and personal garden the affairs of the movement and its policies. In consequence many people wonder what is going to happen to the vital center. They ask whether Conservative Judaism has a future at all, or will it disintegrate and divide up among

Orthodoxy and Reform (as, rabbis tell me, people now expect). In institutional terms, I not only do not know the answer to that question, I also do not care, because I do not think it matters.

If the Jewish Theological Seminary of America forms a center for the living Judaism of the vital center, if from that institution and its associated organizations important ideas come forth, inspiration and leadership, energy and imagination—then the future of the institutional Conservative movement matters a great deal. But it is bright and secure (and, by the way, the money will flow). If the Jewish Theological Seminary of America continues its present attitudes and policies toward its constituency near at hand and toward Jewry at large (and many of us hope that the institution will change those attitudes and policies and come back to Jewry at large with humility and hope), then what difference does it make? We can have a new Jewish Theological Seminary of America—if for the twenty-first century that is the best institutional model. Or we can decide to educate our rabbis and teachers and cantors and other religious figures in different ways. The institutional model of a private and isolated institution, doing everything on its own and by itself, certainly competes with alternatives.

No institution can claim a permanent hold, and none has a mortgage on our future. The vital center—that religious attitude and position presently represented (but only partially) by the Jewish Theological Seminary, United Synagogue, Rabbinical Assembly—will flourish, if not in the presently deeply flawed, paralyzed institutions and organizations that today represent the center, then in the many others that now flourish or will come into existence. It is the religious ideal, the Judaic ideal, that will endure: the ideal of free Jews, freely choosing to be Judaic and to build a distinctive Judaic religious life in an integrated and open society. No institution has a monopoly on that ideal:

it is American Judaism for—I would guess—90 percent of American Jews. So much for the vital center: too crowded for the Judaism that created it. What of Reform Judaism?

If I had to choose two words to characterize the contemporary state of Reform Judaism, they would be sloth and envy. I call Reform Judaism slothful because it has become lazy about developing its own virtues and so deprives all Judaisms of its invaluable gifts, its insights, and its powerful ideas. I call it envious because it sees virtue in others and despises itself. The single greatest and most urgent idea in the Jewish world today is the one idea that Reform Judaism has made its own and developed for us all, and that is the idea that God loves all humanity, not only holy Israel. Today, no single idea is more urgent than that one. Reform Judaism in the temples and in the schools lacks vitality, even while it correctly points to enormous growth. Reform Judaism in the United States is the most numerous Judaism and is growing faster than Conservativism and, in absolute numbers, much faster than Orthodoxy. The reason is that Reform Judaism has accurately taken the measure of the condition of American Jewry and has framed a Judaism that deals with the real and urgent issues of contemporary American Jewish life.

But that success, for which the lay people must take credit, since they are the creators of Reform Judaism, has yet to make its mark on the morale and attitude of the Reform movement. The movement still regards itself as a second-class and somehow less than fully legitimate Judaism. By “the movement” I do not mean a few theologians at Hebrew Union College who have set forth a solid and substantial rationale for Reform Judaism in both history (Michael A. Meyer) and theology (Jakob J. Petuchowski). I mean the vast number of pulpit rabbis and lay persons, who see more observant Jews and think they are somehow inferior, who meet more learned Jews and think they are in some way less.

Without conceding for one minute that less observance or less learning are to be treated as unimportant, I think Reform Judaism has a message to offer to all Jews, including the most Orthodox of the Orthodox and the most nationalistic of the nationalists, and one that in importance outweighs not eating lobster and studying the Talmud. It is that Judaism as Reform Judaism defines Judaism as a religion of respect and love for the other, as much as for the self. Reform Judaism teaches that God loves all people, finds and emphasizes those teachings of the received holy books of the Torah that deliver that message, and rejects bigotry and prejudice when practiced not only by Gentiles but even by Jews.

And there should be no doubt at all that the single most urgent moral crisis facing the communities of Judaisms today is the Jews' self-indulgent hostility toward the other or the outsider. The novelist, Norman Mailer,⁵ in language reminiscent of the prophetic tradition stated what I conceive to be the great contribution of Reform Judaism to the life of Jewry everywhere:

What made us great as a people is that we, of all ethnic groups, were the most concerned with the world's problems. . . . We understood as no other people how the concerns of the world were our concerns. The welfare of all the people of the world came before our own welfare. . . . The imperative to survive at all costs . . . left us smaller, greedier, narrower, preternaturally touchy and self-seeking. We entered the true and essentially hopeless world of the politics of self-interest, "is this good for the Jews?" became, for all too many of us, all of our politics.

Mailer concluded, "The seed of any vital American future must still break through the century-old hard-pack of hate, contempt, corruption, guilt, odium, and horror. . . . I am tired of living in the miasma of our indefinable and ongoing national shame." I find in Mailer's com-

ments that morally vital prophetic tradition that Reform Judaism—alone among contemporary Judaisms—espouses. But today Reform Judaism has lost its nerve, and just when Jewry needs precisely that for which Reform Judaism has always stood, the message is muffled.

The costs to the Jewish people are to be measured by our incapacity to work out our relationships to the world beyond. I refer to an address by Professor Yehoshaphat Harkabi, Hebrew University, to the Council of Reform and Liberal Rabbis at the Liberal Jewish Synagogue in London last year. Harkabi chose his platform well, the only religious Judaic platform for his message, that there is a crisis in our relationships to the Gentiles ("the goyim"). He raised in a stunning public statement the issue of the divisive power of the Jewish religion within the Jewish people itself. Harkabi raised the possibility that "the Jewish religion that hitherto has bolstered Jewish existence may become detrimental to it." Harkabi pointed to manifestations of hostility against Gentiles, formerly repressed, but ascendant in the past decade. In the state of Israel, in particular, that hostility took such forms as the following: The Chief Rabbi Mordekhai Eliahu forbade Jews in the state of Israel to sell apartments to Gentiles. A former Chief Rabbi ruled that a Jew had to burn a copy of the New Testament. A scholar who has received the Israel Prize in Judaic Studies, Rabbi Eliezer Waldenberg, declared that a Gentile should not be permitted to live in Jerusalem. The body of a Gentile woman who lived as a Jew without official conversion was disinterred from a Jewish cemetery.

Explaining these and many other expressions of anti-Gentile prejudice, Harkabi pointed to the belief of what he called "religious radicals" in the imminent coming of the Messiah as explanation for these developments. They are not limited to the state of Israel. Harkabi called for "discarding those elements" of Judaism that instill or express hostility to outsiders. He said, "Demonstrating to

Orthodoxy that some of its rulings are liable to raise general opprobrium may facilitate the achievement of a modus vivendi between it and the other streams in contemporary Judaism."

Where are we to find the corpus of ideas concerning Gentiles to counter these appalling actions and opinions of the pseudomessianic Orthodoxy of the state of Israel? I find them these days mainly in Reform Judaism. And in the state of Israel Reform Judaism has made its mark. But in our own community, it is, as I said, lazy and envious of others, insecure and slothful and conciliatory of views it must reject and abhor. That is not to suggest that only Reform Judaism has a contribution to make to the moral renaissance of the Jewish people, correctly characterized by Mailer as now too self-absorbed for their own good. Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion has delivered to Reform Jews a corps of rabbis bearing a moral concern and — more important — an intellectual system and structure that form a monument to the capacity of Israel — the Jewish people — to think both of itself and also of the other, and to love not only itself but also the outsider. Now, when we need Reform Judaism more than ever for the moral renewal of all Israel — the Jewish people — what Reform Jews must find within their hearts are not sloth and envy but the two opposite virtues: energy and conviction.

And what of Orthodoxy? If Reform Judaism exhibits a failure of nerve, all Orthodox Judaisms display a failure of intellect. It is not that they are stupid or wrong or venal, merely that they are irrelevant to the great issues of the world and the age. Except for Yeshiva-University Orthodoxy, all of the Orthodox Judaisms of the day (the "Haredim" in various guises) exhibit the same enormous incapacity to speak to the Jewish condition. In the various formulations claiming to give us true-blue Judaism, all of them sailing under the flag of Orthodoxy (a whole fleet of

motley ships, from rowboats to battleships, all of them obsolete), we find the same failure of mind. And the worst thing a religion can do is fall silent before the urgent issues of the age. Khomeini is, at least, relevant, capable of shaping events. Whether in Bnei Braq or among the Lubovitch Hasidim and at all stations inbetween and around, all Orthodox Judaisms pretend there is no there there.

That is not to suggest Orthodox Judaisms are ignorant of the classics of Judaism or misrepresent their content. To the contrary, the representation of Torah-true Judaism by the Haredim is sound on every point. Knowledgeable people can quote chapter and verse in talmudic writings in support of their position on all issues. On issue after issue they represent the Torah—oral and written—precisely as the received, classical sources of the Torah portray matters.

And that is precisely why the policies and program of the Haredim, and therefore of the Judaism of the dual Torah, oral and written, as they accurately represent those policies, offer no meaningful option to Jews in the world today—I do not say to “Orthodox” or “Religious” Jews, but to any Jews. The Haredim appeal, after all, to the fact that they authentically portray “Judaism,” or the Torah, more accurately than anyone else, more so than Western or Modern Orthodoxy, more authentically than the Orthodoxy of the Zionist-Religious parties. And that appeal, to the spiritual and the romantic in us all, is very real. It is why the Haredim gain converts to their Judaism from among the Religious-Zionists and the secular alike: there is a very real choice. So there is, and the 95 percent of the Jews who by instinct reject the reading of the Torah, or of Judaism, by the Haredim, make a sound judgment. The claim to authenticity to “the tradition” or “the Torah” requires us to ask whether the Torah in its received or authentic or accurate version, as the Haredim represent it, can serve in the twenty-first century. I think it cannot.

The Torah as the Haredim read it (rightly, as I said) omits all systematic doctrine on the three critical matters of contemporary life: politics, economics, and science. The Torah in its authentic version has nothing at all to say about three matters so fundamental that any Judaism today that authentically realizes the Torah, oral and written, demands that Jews live only a partial life and, in the case of the state of Israel, dismantle the Jewish state. Jews living in the Golah or Exile, for their part, without a position on politics, economics, and science simply will have to retreat into ghettos, having no way to cope with the formative forces in the world today. The Haredim want to make us all into Amish, and the Jews are not going to agree, even though, just now, more than a few would like to walk out on the world as it is.

The three most powerful and formative forces in all of human civilization today are democracy, capitalism, and science, and on those three subjects, the authentic, classical Judaism, accurately represented by the Haredim, either has nothing at all to say, or simply says the wrong things. Authentic Judaism, as the Haredim teach it, is ignorant of the things that matter today. We cannot look to the Haredim for intelligent public policy. The Haredim can make their extravagant claims on the rest of us only by relating to the remainder of the Jewish people essentially as parasites: we do the politics, the economics, and the science, so they can live out their private lives off in a corner. Abandon the Jewish state, for Israelis, and give up all public life, for Jews in the Golah; that is the message of their authentic Judaism, with its stunning silence on democracy, capitalism, and science and technology.

There are three reasons for this silence, because of their very valid claim to authenticity to the tradition. First, we look in vain in the Talmud and related writings for a political theory that fits together with the politics of a democratic state. Israelis need no instruction from the Golah

on that awful fact. If the Haredim gain in politics, it will end democracy in the state of Israel, pure and simple. Second, we find nothing in talmudic and related writings that makes possible scientific inquiry, that is, systematic formulation of theory and empirical testing of hypothesis. When philosophy, including science, found a capacious place within Judaism, it was only because modes of thought deriving not from talmudic but from Greek-Muslim philosophical sources had found entry. And they were perceived as alien. The great philosophers and scientists did not come from the circles who studied only the Torah, and the institutions of the Torah did not produce philosophy or science, any more than, today, they study those subjects. The Haredim have nothing to say of interest to, or to learn from, the world of science and technology. But that is where the world is made today.

Third, systematic thought on economics, such as the Mishnah assuredly presupposes, by the end of talmudic times had given way to an essentially magical conception that if one studies Torah, economic questions will be solved by themselves. Rational decision-making, the conception of a market and of a market-economy—these and other givens of economics find no place whatsoever in the (at best) petty entrepreneurial thinking of the Torah in its authentic mode. Consequently, Judaism as the Haredim accurately represent it, falls silent on questions of economics. How can people utterly ignorant of economics pretend to govern a modern state or to lead the Jewish community overseas?

Modern Orthodoxy in the United States of America, the Orthodoxy of Bar Ilan University and Yeshiva University, and of the Israeli Zionist-Religious parties, all have made ample room for science, democracy, and economic theory in the curriculum in the academy and also in its formulation of public policy (though here, the Zionist Religious parties seem to leave such matters to the partners

in whatever coalition gives them their annual prohibition of pork or its counterpart). That Western Orthodoxy is losing out, so it seems, to the valid claim of authenticity to the true Torah set forth by the Haredim and by their political instrumentalities. It is pure romanticism or utter fantasy to opt for the authentic merely because it is true about the things of which it speaks. Jewish public life, both in the Golah and in the Jewish state, have also to ask about the ominous silences. The Judaism of the Talmud accurately represented, so far as the sources portray it, by the Haredim, simply cannot and will not work, not because it is wrong or humanly deficient, but because it falls silent when the work of the world has to be done.

No state can work without well-crafted public policy, without economic policy, without access to science and technology. Any lingering appeal of the Haredim to that isolationism that makes us Jews want to turn our backs on the world, any deep impulse in us all to be only Jewish, always Jewish, and, at last, the right way, the way of the true Torah of Sinai—any appeal to that profound and natural sense in us all of our Jewishness as our fate and faith and destiny will have to compete with another appeal. It is the appeal to the simple fact that, if we are going to live in the twenty-first century, we require not only the Torah but also economics, politics, and science and technology, about which the Torah, in the authentic statement of the Haredim, simply has nothing to say, nothing whatsoever. World Jewry has no choice but to turn its back on the Haredim, as they have turned their back on the twenty-first century—and for precisely the same reason. Would that God had made the world so simple as the Haredim wish it to be!

They are right, and therefore all of us have to reject them and their entirely authentic Torah. After all, there were valid reasons for inventing Reform Judaism and the Orthodoxy of Samson Raphael Hirsch, the Religious Zi-

onist parties, the secular Jews, Conservative Judaism, Reconstructionist Judaism, Jewish Socialism, Yiddishism, and all the rest. The opposition to these movements rightly claimed they were not authentic, and the opposition was right. But Reform Judaism and Western Orthodoxy and the Religious Zionists, Yeshiva University and Bar Ilan University – these were still more right, because they were, and remain, relevant. They do address all of life as we now know it, and they have something to say about politics, science, economics, while the Haredim do not.

The Haredim have nothing to say on all the urgent issues of the hour. We do not solve problems by pretending they are not there. So the Haredim and all the Orthodox Judaisms that find a place within that classification do not present an option or a possibility for Jews who do not live in ghettos and do not pretend the twenty-first century can simply be ignored, as though it were not going to happen. When the dream is over, the world will be there, perhaps a nightmare, when we wake up. So, fond farewell to the fantasy that the authentic Torah of Sinai, as the framers of the Bavli read it in the seventh century, is, or can ever be, the authentic Torah of Sinai, as Israel, the Jewish people everywhere, receive and affirm it in the twenty-first century: we shall do and we shall hear, indeed: *today*.

AND YET: TOMORROW

Were the story to end with the creation of the new Judaisms of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, we should face an unhappy ending. But the advent of the twenty-first century, in my view, marks the beginning of a new age of Judaic *systemopoeia*. The vital signs appear round about. I point to the formation of a distinctively Judaic politics and another among the intellectuals of the Right as well. These two intellectual formations present two of the three prerequisites of a Judaism: a worldview and a way of life. Both of them join the everyday and the

here and now to an ideal in which people can find the meaning and purpose of their life together. Whether these political Judaisms can take root in the social worlds of numbers of Jews and so constitute of themselves not merely theologies and life-patterns but "Israels," that is, social entities, remains to be seen. Reform, Conservatism, and Western Orthodoxy, as well as Zionism and Jewish Socialism-Yiddishism, all formed not merely intellectual positions but social worlds. Their strength lay in transforming organizations into societies, so to speak. So far what we have in *Tikkun* and *Commentary* is more than a viewpoint, but less than a broad social movement, widely diffused.

I point further to the havurah movement, the renewal of Reconstructionism with Arthur Waskow and Arthur Green, the development of an accessible Judaic mysticism by Zalman Schachter, the intense engagement by feminists of Jewish origin in the framing of what we may call a feminist-Judaism, and the like. Each of these extraordinarily vital religious formations gives promise of establishing a Judaism: a worldview, a way of life, realized within a social entity that calls itself (not necessarily exclusively) "Israel." All of them have identified urgent questions and presented in response answers that, to the framers, prove self-evidently valid. And with these five conditions—a worldview, way of life, attained by an "Israel," that all together identifies an urgent question and answers it in a manner self-evidently valid to the engaged persons—we have a Judaism. So I think the long period in which there were no new Judaisms in formation is coming to an end, though it is much too soon to tell which Judaisms in North America at least will inherit the greater part of Jewry and take over, as Conservative Judaism did in the second and third generations, and as Reform Judaism has been doing in the third, fourth, and fifth generations.

What accounts for the hopeful future? I pointed to three factors in accounting for the barren age: the intense political crisis culminating in the Holocaust with its demographic catastrophe, the demise of intellect, and the (correlative) formation of large-scale organizations that reformed Jewry within the corporate model. The new Judaisms of the acutely contemporary age succeed, I think, because we have pretty well overcome the demographic and cultural catastrophe of the Holocaust. We have in North America a vast Jewish population, capable of sustaining the variety of Judaisms that the vast ocean of Jewry in central and eastern Europe did in the later nineteenth and earlier twentieth centuries. It is perfectly clear from the character of the examples of new Judaisms to which I have pointed that the one source of strength in *systemopoeia* today is intellect. Jewish intellectual life within Judaism flourishes in North America in a way that, I think, would have stirred envy in even the proudest Jews of Germany and Poland between the Wars.

And the corporate model for organized Jewry has shown its limitations. The decay of Bnai Brith, the demise on the local scene of organizations such as the American Jewish Congress, the retreat of Jewish organizational life from the scale of the retail to that of the wholesale, the retreat of the Federations from the ideal of forming "the organized Jewish community" and their transformation into mere fund-raising agencies—these show what is happening. The decline of the powerful national organizations at the center strongly suggests that, in the everyday world at home, Jews no longer find interesting a Judaic existence consisting of going to meetings to talk about something happening somewhere else. Merely giving money, for instance, to help another Jew help a third Jew settle in the state of Israel has lost all credibility. People want hands-on engagement, and the corporate model affords the opposite. Common to all the hopeful signs of nascent Judaic

systems is the immediate engagement of the individual in achieving the purposes of the social group. The hallmark of the havurah movement, at least as some of us thought it up thirty years ago,⁶ was individual engagement in the ultimate purpose of the group. And that rejection of the corporate model and affirmation of the place of the individual at the center of activity now marks the mode of organization of every important new Judaism today.⁷

To explain why no new Judaisms, I can therefore account also for why we now see many new and vital Judaisms: we no longer live in an iron cage, and the fulfillment of our calling to be Israel comes only through our immediate and complete engagement with our highest spiritual and cultural values—whatever our Judaism tells us these are. We have, in other words, survived the twentieth century.

Notes

1. My thanks to Michael Lerner for insisting that I take account of that fact, on which much more presently.
2. My entire intellectual life has addressed the program of Max Weber, from my dissertation onward. My entire notion of systemic analysis and the comparison of systems within Judaism, worked out most fully and in acute detail in the study of the Judaic systems of late antiquity, simply applies in detail his main perspectives.
3. Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, tr. Talcott Parsons, with a foreword by R. H. Tawney (New York: Charles Scribner's, 1930), 182.
4. I amplify these matters in my *Death and Birth of Judaism* (New York: Basic, 1987).
5. *New York Times*, 18 April 1988.
6. The original idea of the ancient Jewish havurot as a model for social organization is in Jakob J. Petuchowski's article in *The Reconstructionist* in 1957. There followed my articles on the subject, collected in my *Fellowship in Judaism* (London: Valentine, Mitchell, 1963), where I proposed the idea of regaining access to the havurot of antiquity. Other early writings by those active in the earliest phases of the movement are collected in the book I edited, *Contemporary Judaic Fellowship in Theory and in Practice* (New York: KTAV, 1972).

7. The *Tikkun* conference in New York City is an example of that fact. I see no clear counterpart in the political Judaism of the Right, which seems to me fragmented in social circles, e.g., around *Commentary* for some, around *National Review* and *Chronicles* for others (myself included). Professors of Jewish origin in the new National Association of Scholars, for example, hardly form the counterpart to the social formation attained at the *Tikkun* conference. In this regard the Left has provided the Right with a model of how to do things.