

Responses to American Jewish Committee Queries

1. From the very beginning of Jewish history, with the emergence of Abraham, three elements were intertwined: an Idea, a People, and a Land. The Idea was "ethical monotheism," later incorporated in Torah; the People was the "seed of Abraham"; and the Land was Eretz Israel. We were able to survive without the third, but only so long as we recognized that we were in "exile" in every place outside the Land.

Our situation today is unprecedented. Israelis today have a Land, but very little of a common Idea, and increasingly tenuous connections with a People. Diaspora Jewry, especially American Jewry, is highly ambivalent about the Land as well. This means that our fragmentation is far advanced. I am therefore not at all sanguine about the future cohesiveness of *Am Yisrael*. Nevertheless, we must exert every effort to get a maximum number of Jews to share a sense of peoplehood and a common destiny.

The unraveling of the fabric of Jewish identity began with the Emancipation and has accelerated since then. When there was at least a minimal standard for Jewishness (the halakhic norm that a Jew is one born to a Jewish mother) that was accepted by almost all groups, religious or secular, one could hope to unite the People around an identity rooted in a reality, in this case a biological one--not dissimilar to the statement that a Frenchman is one born in or who lives in France, a geographical reality. However, with the current abandonment of this "reality rooted" identity in favor of a completely, or almost completely, voluntaristic one, as advanced by the adoption of patrilinealism by the Reform movement and by certain decisions of the Israeli judiciary, the common basis for Jewish peoplehood becomes more and more remote.

Can some compromise be found? A basically voluntaristic standard for Jewish peoplehood that stands some chance of successfully holding most of us together can best be achieved by searching for a common strand that can best pass the "reality test," i.e., that is least dependent upon opinion or ideology or whim. Such a strand is--our collective memory. If most of us Jews no longer share basic assumptions about the great questions

of life and faith, we at least share a past. History and literature therefore become critical in defining the basis for Jewish peoplehood. But these must be pursued passionately, with focused attention, and not merely asserted. And whatever other shreds of commonality remain with us should be protected and enhanced as well.

Thus, there must be a reintroduction of Jews to the classics of their own great literature, from the Bible down. All Jewish groups and "denominations" can teach Jewish history, no matter how much their interpretations may differ. More Jews must learn Hebrew or at least be exposed to it. We should restore the use of the classical Jewish calendar alongside the conventional secular calendar. We should continue to work for wider acceptance of the "Israel experience" (the ultimate success of which will depend on the follow-up when the young people return to their homes, and also to what and whom they will be exposed while they are in Israel). Every Jew should be given and use a Hebrew name in addition to if not in place of his or her English or any other non-Hebrew name. We should create a minimum Jewish library for every Jewish home.

But ultimately, all such efforts rest upon the foundation of a genuine attempt to create mass Jewish education in Israel and the Diaspora. Nothing less than a "Marshall Plan" is needed, something on the scale, relatively, of the Manhattan Project. The "Jewish continuity" movement so far has been more in the nature of good will gestures, and that will not save us. A minimum Jewish education will include what we all share as Jews, such as history and literature; what should be common to all Jews, such as language and other cultural artifacts; and teaching those things which some Jews hold dear but which all Jews need to know about and respect even if they disagree.

2. Mutual recriminations among various groups accomplish nothing and, indeed, are counter-productive. Rather, each group must undergo the process of *cheshbon ha-nefesh*, such as is now being undertaken by Modern Orthodox Jews in Israel and the U.S.A. (Wouldn't it be refreshing if every movement and organization in Jewish life would announce, before every Yom Kippur, the results of its internal stock-taking along with a list of its errors and the plans to correct them--instead of the immodest boasting of its "accomplishments?" We do believe in the Messiah...)

3. A distinction must be made between two levels: the practical or political issue which affects the State of Israel, and the ideological question, which affects religion-minded Jews the world over. With regard to the latter, those who are committed to democracy (and that includes the overwhelming majority of all religious as well as non-religious Jews) must appreciate that democracy is a political system and not a metaphysical or theological construct, and that religious people do--and are entitled to--believe in higher purposes that transcend political interests or values. It is when Judaism is taken as a political system, and when democracy is treated as if it were a religion, that the conflicts become unavoidable and the systems irreconcilable. I assume, therefore, that we are being asked about the former rather than the latter.

First, it must be made clear that American democracy is not the only valid form of democracy--something most Americans are unaware of--and that other versions of democracy leave more ample room for religious expression by the society. Second, there is a large degree of commonality between democratic values and Jewish teaching. This should be researched objectively and honestly, with scholarly rectitude, and it should not sound or be apologetic. There is no need to prove that Judaism is more democratic than the American constitution; it is not necessary that every pronouncement of the ACLU or other such group be considered critical to the existence of democracy such that Judaism must be "reconciled" with it. The sources for such Jewish teachings are not only Scripture and Talmud but, even more to the point and more practically, the organization of Jewish communities in the Middle Ages in Central and Western Europe (the late Prof. Irving Agus of Yeshiva University has done important spade work in this area). The results of such efforts, both scholarly and popular, should be widely disseminated. Third, where they diverge, religious Jews should understand that not all Jewish doctrine is meant to be applied in all historic circumstances and that Judaism can accommodate itself to less than ideal circumstances--as it has done successfully throughout much of its history. At the same time, other Jews should appreciate that a great deal of the polemic surrounding religion in Israel is fundamentally *cultural* rather than political, and they too must make accommodations and not expect that all Jews must assimilate the vulgar standards of American culture as the dominant public culture either in Israel or in the Jewish communities of the Diaspora.