

What Do Jews Believe?"

Response to the Commentary Symposium

by Norman Lamm*

1. Yes, it goes without saying that I believe in God. But my big and terrifying question is whether *He* believes in *me*... More than a cute answer, this is a religious as opposed to a theological response. Theology, a monologue by man about God, has its place on the periphery of the consciousness of a believing Jew. In the center, however, stands God, and man must not merely *think about* Him, but *respond to* Him as part of the dialogue between man and his Creator. The creation of the human race was an act of faith by God in man, and the response of man determines whether that confidence was vindicated or misplaced.

In Judaism, the will of God is made known to man in the Torah, mostly in the form of *mitzvot*, commandments. These commandments are, by their very nature, binding. They summon man to obey, and the human reaction comes on many levels and is accompanied by a variety of emotions. It is this interplay between summons and response, and their almost infinite variety of nuances and subtleties, that determines the quality of one's religious experience. But underlying all is the

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conception of the *mitzvot* as theonomous rather than autonomous: we may understand or not understand a commandment, prefer one *mitzvah* to another, but all God's will must be obeyed.

2. Israel was chosen at Sinai as "a holy nation and a kingdom of priests." A "holy nation" is a mission for the polity in and for itself: to grow in sanctity as a godly people. A "kingdom of priests" is the outward reach of the Jewish enterprise in the world: to be a priest-teacher to all of humanity, inviting it by both word and example to fulfill the "image of God" in which every human being was created. The two are linked: Israel cannot teach if it is not itself informed, and therefore it must always strive to be a "holy nation." And its own inner mission is unfulfilled if it fails to communicate holiness--in its numinousness and its ethical consequences--as "a kingdom of priests" to the rest of the world.

The Torah makes it quite clear that we were chosen neither because of our intrinsic merit nor in order to lord it over others, but by virtue of the Patriarchs, especially Abraham whose heart was "found" by God to be faithful and who was promised posterity who would carry on his work of "proclaiming the Name of God" to the world.

The distinctive role of the Jewish people in today's world is blurred, because our people is hopelessly fragmented, with most Jews as unacquainted with their own history as they are ignorant of the fundamentals of their traditions and its texts. I regard as an aberration the notion that the "liberal agenda" so favored by most American Jews is the true mission of world Jewry.

Transforming politics, no matter how high-minded, into a religion is a species of contemporary idolatry and is particularly peculiar when espoused by people for whom the separation of piety from politics is an unassailable dogma. The message of Torah must become clear to Jewry before it is propounded to the rest of mankind. It is therefore incumbent upon that segment of the people which is genuinely and whole-heartedly committed to Torah, whatever the differences in interpretation that divide them, to become the surrogates of all Israel as the "kingdom of priests." That mission must be expressed in universal rather than in parochial terms, and in a manner that is both true to the sources and that is comprehensible to contemporary men and women who have gone through the experience of modernity. In its broadest terms, that means the teaching of the dignity of humankind (the "image of God"), the unity of all His creatures ("for have we not all one father?"), the concern for the well-being of society (*tikkun olam*), the sanctity of life ("he who saves one life it is as if he saved the entire world"), the ultimate redemption of mankind (the belief in Messiah--too much to elaborate in a short statement!), etc. More specifically, it means the "Seven Noahide Laws" as prescribed by the Halakha. Such a program, whether conceived of narrowly or broadly, incorporates much of the more generous sentiments of modern Jews at the same time that it rejects the hedonism and relativism that have been adopted by secularist Jews as fundamental to their outlook.

3. The Holocaust, incomprehensibly cruel, has shaken my faith--but not destroyed it. The emergence of Jewish independence, especially after the Holocaust, has reenforced my faith--but not convinced me that we live in necessarily Messianic times. The confluence of both in my

consciousness has stretched the perimeters and deepened the quality of my faith, and made me more tolerant of both those who lost their faith and those who clearly perceive the footsteps of Messiah in the State of Israel. Most of all, it has made me more consciously Jewish and, at the same time, less tolerant of pat answers and simplistic formulations about the truly overarching questions of life and destiny.

4. To the extent that political views reflect broad cultural orientations, the political center to right-of-center provides the most accommodating environment for the growth of Jewish religious life and, hence, Jewish continuity. If the Left is the home of secularism, materialism, permissiveness, etc., and the Right of a repressive conformity and religious fundamentalism (both descriptions are exaggerated), Jewish life in America will not flourish; the former encourages values that are thoroughly inimical to Judaism, and the latter is threatening to Jews who live in a country with a Christian majority. Jewish tradition has suffered enormously under the cultural hegemony of the elitists of the Left. The academy and the media, amongst others, have not proven hospitable to religion in general and to Jewish religion in particular. A right of center orientation--inclining to traditional values in such matters as sexual morality--which also respects differences in our multicultural society, and which steers clear of dogmatic extremism of both Right and Left, will foster Jewish commitment more than either end of the political-cultural spectrum.

5. Jewish "unity" is a theme guaranteed to evoke an industrial-size yawn. It is a chimerical

nostrum regularly invoked by organizational drum-beaters, not an idea capable of real expression. It is best to give up the ghost and speak not of unity, but of civility, respect, and cooperation--where possible. It is inconceivable for me, as an Orthodox Jew, to think of genuine Jewish religious unity when Reform, currently the largest movement, has embraced patrilinealism, ordained gays and lesbians as Reform rabbis, and otherwise given enthusiastic ecclesiastical approval to almost every avant-garde liberal movement in the general society. Extremes beget extremes, and significant segments of Orthodoxy are moving in the opposite direction, demanding conformity, and associating almost automatically with the more (or even most) right-wing political movements both in America and Israel. It is a moot question as to which side began the process of estrangement. The fact is that real unity is impossible and even unthinkable today, and the best and most advisable policy is for all to seek enough common ground to devise an agenda which will benefit the entire people.

6. There can be no "large-scale" revival of *Judaism* as long as *Jews* are vanishing. With out-marriage at an all-time high, the birth-rate below replacement, and assimilation rampant, it is hard to conceive of a broad revival of Judaism in this country. But this pessimism applies only to the near future. Looking further ahead, I see a rearrangement of forces in a shrunken American Jewish community--one that is far more committed to Torah, with a much larger birth rate, paying real attention to Jewish education, and that holds the promise of growing into a more populous, self-confident, and religiously committed community--all this, of course, depending upon the nature of the envioning society and the developments within the State of Israel. The

great question then will be, whether a modicum of cohesiveness can develop between the now much larger religious segment and the smaller but still significant secularist/liberal groups. It is to that to which a worried and enlightened Jewish leadership must address itself--now, not later, when it may well be too late.