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## Who Is A Jew?

There was a time when it was easier to answer the question, "Who Is A Jew?" In the small villages of Russia and Poland, a Jew was anyone with whom another Jew mingled. A Jew was the children of your aunt and uncle, your friends with whom you played, the children with whom you went to school. One hundred years ago, in the most populous Jewish sections of Europe, a Jew was someone who was not a Christian, someone who said the blessings before the Torah, someone who did not eat meat and milk together. The tens of thousands of Jews who came to America around the turn of the century were people who ate hamentaschen on Purim. They ate matzah on Passover and gefilte fish on Friday night. You did not need to define a Jew very closely in those days, because he defined himself so clearly in what he did and ate and in how he spoke and dressed.

Short decades ago, the Nazis set themselves up as authorities on the question, "Who is a Jew?" The Nazi leader Goering, declared, "I decide who is a Jew". What he meant, of course, was that he decided who was worthy of the gas chamber. For Goering, being Jewish was a matter of blood, on the one hand, or a matter of being anti-Nazi on the other. Short decades ago, anti-semitism was so open that the French philosopher, Sartre, wrote, "A Jew is anyone the non-Jew believes to be a Jew". Short years ago, it was impossible for a Jew to escape his Jewishness, even if he wished to assimilate. Since anti-semitism is more subtle today, since assimilation appears to be easier, since Jews, for the most part, have stepped out of their ghettos into the world at large, the question, "Who is a Jew," has suddenly become one only the Jew can answer, and he is finding it increasingly more difficult and more important to answer.

The age old definition of a Jew, as found in the Talmud, was recently challenged by a case tried before the Israeli Supreme Court.\* The Talmud teaches that a Jew is one born to a Jewish

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mother who has not openly renounced his faith. It further teaches that a non-Jew may become a Jew by sincerely accepting the Jewish faith. When the Supreme Court of Israel tried to broaden this definition in order to justify the entry of more people into Israel, a furore arose in that nation led by the Orthodox Rabbinate. The problem was not resolved until the Israeli Congress, or K'nesset, had passed a new law which, in effect, distinguishes between a Jew and an Israeli. The K'nesset left the religious definition of a Jew intact, but it legislated that one need not be a "Jew" to become an Israeli, if one is married to a Jew or if one is the child of at least one Jewish parent.

### A New Definition For American Jews

The Israelis solved their problem in this regard as their immigration needs demand. They need as many immigrants as they can get. We Jews in America, however, face an entirely different situation. It is my strong feeling that we need a new definition of what it means to be a Jew suitable to the needs of our particular moment in history. The Orthodox and traditional Jews in America will, of course, hold to the Talmudic definition. For them, a Jew is anyone born to a Jewish mother or a sincere convert. It is my suggestion, however, that the Hebrew prophets had a definition much more suitable to our time. The prophets emphasized that being a Jew is not a matter of birth but a matter of belief and actions. Twenty-six hundred years ago, the Prophet Jeremiah proclaimed against those who were Jews in name only. "Behold," he contended, "the circumcised have become as those uncircumcised." Jeremiah believed that if a Jew did not follow the laws of justice and mercy associated with the covenant, then, he ceased to have those particular qualities which make one a Jew.

Orthodox Jews sometimes forget that Abraham, through whom Judaism was founded, was born of pagan parents. It was not blood which made Abraham a Jew but the fact that he entered into a covenant (the brit) with God. The example of Abraham, "Our Father", teaches us that a Jew is anyone who enters into this covenant (the brit) with God. The example of Abraham, "our father," teaches us that a Jew is anyone who enters into this covenant. Reform Judaism would suggest that to the extent that a

person born of Jewish parents disregards the content and responsibilities of the covenant\*, he or she is that much less a Jew. Reform Jews hold with the Prophets that it is the inner commitment that makes one a Jew and not the accident of birth.

The Prophets further distinguished between those who make a show of ritualistic observance and those who are true to the essence of the covenant. The core of the covenant consists of laws concerning the proper treatment of one's fellow human beings. The Prophet Micah tells us that what God wants most from us is the performance of mishpat (the core laws of the covenant, justice-judgement), the love of covenant duty (ahavat hesed), and walking with God in humility (doing what God wants us to do). Micah's instruction to his people has been translated as "do justly, love mercy, and walk humbly . . .". I have tried to translate the Hebrew to stress the fact that Micah was not referring to abstract or general ideals. He was referring to the hundreds of specific humane laws detailed in our Scripture which were an ingrained part of the ancient society.

### How Critical Is The Belief In God?

For the Prophets, as for me, God is the source of whatever special meaning there is to the Jewish people. In days gone by, the Jewish community has excommunicated those who proclaimed publicly that there was no God, but the most narrow Jewish community never excommunicated those who denied God privately. In fact, doubts about God were, at times, considered an expression of religiosity. One has only to read the Psalms and the Book of Job in our Bible to learn that our ancestors did not hesitate to review their old concepts of God. They did not consider it irreverent to question old concepts and to project newer and higher concepts. That is to say, they never made an idol of their current concept of God. As their views broadened, they put the "old God" on trial, so to speak,

\*The biblical covenant contains both moral and ceremonial law. Traditional Jews hold that we cannot choose between the two kinds of law. Both are equally important to God and binding on us. Reform Judaism teaches that the moral law is binding. On the other hand, we are free to select that part of the ceremonial law which is meaningful in our time and to create new ceremonial law, just as our ancestors created ceremonial law which enabled them to survive as a distinct people in their time. This critical approach to the ceremonial law does not suggest that we are free to discard all of the ceremonies. The Jews will not survive as a distinct people without a significant corpus of ceremonial law shared by all Jews.

complained about Him and questioned His very existence. Such questioning was considered a valid part of the search for God, which was equated with the search for meaning in life. The only thing the Jewish community would not countenance in the past was the public proclamation of atheism, for this was like saying all community standards have no foundation and may be willfully ignored. Our ancestors thought with Dostoevsky, "Without God, all things are possible". There are no restraints and no standards without God. Without God, good and evil flow into each other and the value of human life and society are questioned.

It is impossible for me to think of Judaism without God, yet it is possible to say that even if a man vocally denies God, Jews need not hold him guilty of blasphemy. We are sophisticated enough to say with one Jewish teacher, "A person's belief in God is to be deduced from his actions. If he vocally denies God but acts with reverence towards God's creatures, it is imputed to him that he believes in God. And, conversely, if a man says he believes in God, but acts cruelly towards God's creatures, behold, this is blasphemy". Here we see again that it is a person's conduct which is the chief thing in Judaism, not his professed beliefs.

### The Decisive Requirement

Extending this line of thinking, we can say that a Jew is one who acts like a Jew, and not necessarily one who says he is a Jew. Just as the State of Israel is increasingly inclined to accept into its midst anyone who will work with it and for it, so, I think, we Jews in America must be increasingly inclined to accept those who want to join our community. Just as the State of Israel requires its citizens to pick up a hoe, or to drive a tractor, or to show some active concern for its existence, so the Jews in America must require of those who claim to be part of our community that they show an active concern for the institutions and well-being of our community. In short, I would say a Jew is anyone, irrespective of whom his mother is, who commits himself to the Jewish community, consciously lives by Jewish values, and works for the survival of the Jewish people.

Specifically, what I am saying is this, one can be a Jew in America and question the reality of God, but one cannot be a Jew and refuse to give money to Jewish charities. One can be a Jew and not attend Synagogue, but one cannot be a Jew and refuse to support the

Synagogue which is the basic Jewish institution in America. One can be a Jew and not be a Zionist by philosophy, but one cannot be a Jew and fail to support the Combined Jewish Appeal and the Israel Emergency Fund. Now, I am not saying that if one gives in generous measure to Jewish charities and to the Synagogue that this giving of one's financial means automatically makes one a good Jew. I am merely saying that you have no right to claim your allegiance to a community when you do not work to make its continued existence possible. Dr. Erich Fromm, the psychologist, suggests that if a woman tells you she loves her flowers, and she refuses to take the time to water them, then, don't believe her! Her inaction tells us what she really feels and thinks. Apply this illustration to yourself and to your friends. In how many ways and to what depth do you work with and for Jewish institutions?

### What Is A "Good" Jew?

To be a "good" Jew is another matter. To be a good Jew requires action more intensive than anything we have previously described. It is one thing to help support Jewish institutions so that the fabric of the community will survive. It is another thing to make of yourself a vessel through which the spirit and dynamism of Judaism flows. To be such a vessel, to be a "good" Jew, one must first learn what Judaism is. One must learn what the Jewish people has represented down through human history, and one must try to understand what specific contributions we can uniquely make today. To be a good Jew one must know what has distinguished our ancestors from their contemporaries. We have to learn why Jews were once able to give the world its primary goals and central ethics, and why the modern Jewish community seems relatively barren and uncreative. Our ancestors believed that human beings are made in the image of the Divine, so they felt impelled to work for human growth and development. To be a good Jew, one has to acquire the conviction that the human community has a purpose beyond mere sensual gratification, and one has to work through the Jewish community and through the general community to help achieve this higher purpose.

To be a good Jew, in today's open society, has to mean something different than it meant in the ghetto. In the old days, the pious Jew confined himself to a study of Jewish culture. We need not be so

restrictive today, but we must make certain that in broadening our cultural base we do not lose that which is vital in our Jewish heritage. To be a good Jew today means that you can claim several heritages intimately as your own but not to the dilution of your Jewish heritage. One can be a Jeffersonian, as I am, and thrill to the ring of the words in the Declaration of Independence and in the Virginia Statute for Religious Liberty, but the good Jew has to remember, even more clearly, the eternal significance of the Ten Commandments and the continuing validity of that large body of ethical law of which the Ten Commandments are only a part. You can be a good Jew and like music from many sources, but not to the dilution of your knowledge of Jewish music. You can thrill to Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, or to the music of "Hair", but if you don't know the special magic of Kol Nidre, Eli Eli and Jerusalem of Gold, then, something is missing from your Jewish I.Q. You can be a good Jew and consider Martin Luther King amongst your saints, as I do, but if you don't also recognize that the words he quoted were from Isaiah and the Hebrew prophets and were born in the suffering of your people, then there is something deficient in your Jewish understanding.

To be a good Jew means that one participates in the cycle of Jewish observance, employing Sabbath and festival rituals to deepen one's sense of Jewishness and to sharpen one's ethical resolve. It means developing that kind of sensitivity to human suffering that moves you to tears as you take that first bite of matzah on Passover and think of the persecuted of all ages. To be a good Jew means learning how to be grateful for the gift of life and for the opportunity life presents to love, to give, and to rejoice, as at Sukkot time, or at every sun-rise. To be a good Jew means to act "as if" as if human striving and history are rooted in a noble purpose. To be a good Jew is to understand, at least as a non-Jew, Eric Hoffer, understands, that the meaning of human history is symbolically wrapped up in the Jewish people. "For if you survive," Hoffer has written, "then, there is hope for the rest of us." If the Jew fails, however, if the Israelis are swallowed up by their enemies, or if the Jews of America passively surrender their identity and become lost in the crowd, then the world has lost its prime symbol of courage and purposefulness. Just as the Christians have long believed that if one Jew could be resurrected there was hope for all mankind, so it is pragmatically true that if the Jewish community survives in dedicated vitality, then it will lend strength by example and infusion to all mankind.

We could discuss the question of what it means to be a good Jew for many hours and days. I think that is a much more involved question than the simple question - What is a Jew? A Jew is one who by his personal actions identifies himself as a Jew. He identifies himself by what he does in his home, in the Synagogue, through Jewish and non-Jewish communal organizations, and by his ethical deeds. Who is a Jew - one who is born of a Jewish mother, or of any other mother, who willingly joins himself to the Jewish group and to its sacred covenant with God. In brief, a Jew is one who is circumcised in his heart, to use Jeremiah's phrase, that is to say, he is committed to the covenant in thought and deed.

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