THE 91ST MOMENT

An editor's notes

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One night last June, more apprehensive than there was any good reason to be, my three daughters and I climbed Masada. We wanted to reach the top by sunrise, which we'd figured for six-thirty or so; six, to be safe. Friends had told us that the climb, via the Snake Path, usually takes an hour, but, as out-of-shape Americans, we should allow for two, just to be sure. That meant we had to start the climb by four; estimating an hour's drive from Jerusalem, we had to be on the road by three—but, taking no chances, we planned to leave by two. And when we discovered that we were all up and eager by half-past one, we decided we might as well be on our way.

Which put us at Masada at two-thirty, and, after dawdling at its base until three, on top at 3:58(!). By the time the darkness began to break apart nearly two hours later, we were too weary, by far, to appreciate the remarkable restoration of the Zealot fortress. Besides, the truth is that we were too filled with our own achievement to have much room for the Zealots', or for Professor Yadin's. We'd come alone, and climbed alone, the moon lighting our way. It was my first Snake Path climb in 30 years, and I had not become more lithe over the decades; for the girls, it was their first ever, and used to climbing mountains, even small ones, in the foreign dark they're not. For the four of us, it was warming confirmation of our capacity for mutual support and, thereby, collective achievement. Neat-o.

So when, on the eve of our return to America, a cousin asked the girls—Rachel, Nomi and Jessica—what of all they'd seen and done in Israel impressed them most, I expected them to say our climb.

Or, perhaps, Yad Vashem. There, as I'd tried to set a fairly rapid pace, the girls had lingered, insisting on seeing each photograph, reading each legend. There we had sat near "the corner of the children," with its infinitely sad statue of Janusz Korczak and the children of his orphanage, and talked of those times and of these. (Though later in our trip we were to visit the more compelling Ghetto Fighters' House, we'd run out of time and down in energy by then, and the visit to Yad Vashem was clearly the more memorable.)

I was, therefore, somewhat surprised when each of my daughters responded that it was our visit with Miriam Mendilow and her Lifeline for the Old—at the very beginning of our trip—that had most moved her.

Briefly: Mrs. Mendilow, a tiny woman in her 70s, decided some years back that it is wrong for us to discard the elderly. Single-handed, she set out to establish workshops where they might be employed, permitting them to continue to live independently and usefully. Several hundred elderly, including not only the healthy but also the physically and mentally disabled, now work in Lifeline's shops. My own favorite of the more than half-dozen workshops is the book bindery, where damaged elementary school texts are rebound and a book plate then inserted: "A gift to the children of Jerusalem from its old folks."

There are, I suppose, other such workshops, but there can scarcely be another such whirlwind of energy, compassion and intelligence as come together in Miriam Mendilow, who has packaged these in one of the most attractively conniving personalities I've anywhere encountered. I've met first-time tourists to Israel, come to the country with schedules fit for presidential candidates, who've made the mistake of stopping at Lifeline early in their trip—only to discard their programs and to spend the balance of their time helping out at Lifeline. She gets to you, this woman Mendilow, with her breathless single-mindedness; her world is so full and so intense it's hard to remember there's another.

But days later, Masada and Yad Vashem and two dozen other places later, I was nonetheless surprised when of all we'd seen, the girls chose Lifeline as the high point of our visit.

We've talked about it since. As nearly as I can understand it, it comes to this: Rachel and Nomi and Jessica cannot volunteer to commit suicide on Masada, nor can they volunteer to enter the gas chambers depicted at Yad Vashem. But they can, and plan to, volunteer, next summer or later, to

lend a hand to Miriam Mendilow. The heroism and martyrdom of the Jewish past are interesting, moving, inspiring, but the stuff of the Jewish present, of Jewish life, is, among many other things, helping sweep the floors of rooms where old folks renew books for children.

With this issue, we inaugurate MOMENT's tenth anniversary year. Back in 1974, when the magazine was gestating, there were those who asked to see its manifesto. But there was no manifesto then, and there is none now. The stories and the poems, the essays and reports of a monthly magazine—these are a more useful guide to the intentions of its editors than their pronouncements.

Yet I am not indifferent to our arrival at Year Ten. Though manifestos are not our style and summaries would be premature, surely a Big Thought or two may be in order? Or, at least, some clues to the things that preoccupy us here.

I write on the very eve of the 1984 elections. There's been much talk in the months of this campaign about selfishness and selflessness. Many of us—I include myself—have found the presidential campaign especially depressing because of the reported intention of the young to vote for Reagan-Bush—and, more to the point, because of the reasons they tend to give for that choice. I can, sort of, understand the not-young. Those (very few) of my friends, middle-aged and older, who plan to vote for Reagan-Bush have a kind of logic on their side: They really do have interests to protect. We disagree on the definition of those interests, and on how they may best be defended, but I understand their decision.

But the young? They are supposed to be moved by other things. Whatever happened to the classic pattern of youthful radicalism, reconfirmed so massively during the 1960s? (Maybe the 1960s is what happened to it.) The young cannot have grown tired of the demands of the liberal commitment, as have so many of their elders; they haven't been around long enough to be worn out. Nor have they, upon disinterested reflection, concluded that conservatism is the better way.

My hunch is that we now witness the specifically political translation of a decade of "looking out for number one" and similar claptrap, the narcissistic psychojunk that came to fill the post-60s vacuum. After the assassinations, after the burning cities, after Vietnam, after Watergate, it was a bit much to expect the tradition of civic commitment to retain its vigor. The young, with no tradition of civic success to fall back on, became profoundly skeptical of society's ability to deliver on its diverse reformist promises, let alone its utopian rhetoric—conservative or liberal.

And so it is that very many of them—not all—seek to avoid commitment, and, with it, risk. Better never to care about the public weal than to experience disappointment, caring's inseparable companion. They hear Mario Cuomo's "tale of two cities," and they are not inspired by it; instead, it merely reinforces their insistent ambition to insure that *their* city is the one on *top* of the hill, fat city.

We've taken to calling this crippling cynicism "selfishness," and contrasting it with the "selflessness" that seems so much more appropriate and charming an attribute of youth.

But that is, I think, a mistaken way to state the issue. Classically, we do not interpret "Love thy neighbor as thyself" as a plea for selflessness. The focus of the words is on the link between love of self and love of other; if you are to love your neighbor "as yourself," you'd better love yourself well. Otherwise, you do your neighbor no favor by loving him.

That's not merely hoary ethical insight; it's also potent psychological theory. Which means that the purpose of an ethical education is not to teach "selflessness," not at all. It is to educate towards a self that derives pride and pleasure and satisfaction from reaching out to others, a self sufficiently secure to delight in sharing and caring and touching.

Among other things, MOMENT tries to be about ethical education. In the contemporary context, that evidently means to buck the tide.

Jewish history may easily be—and often is—taken as an invitation to radical cynicism, to a kind of collective narcissism. To resist that invitation, to insist instead upon an ethic of altruism, to assert not merely the burdens of such an ethic but its joys, not merely its nobility but its pragmatism, is to defy the present trend, to appeal to a truth that goes beyond history, that goes, if you will, to religion in its broadest sense.

This morning, I received in the mail an announcement of a day of outreach that has been planned by a Jewish institution in another city, an institution with a proud history of involvement in the "larger" world. The program is meant to attract people in their 20s and 30s, and it includes four one-and-one-half hour time slots, during each of which those who attend may choose from any of 14 or 15 concurrent seminars—57 seminars in all.

Fifteen of the seminars deal with issues of personal growth—"How to Survive the Break-Up," "How Do You Rate as an Achiever?" and "Survival Cooking" illustrate this group. Another eight focus on career: "Getting Your Face and Name in the News" and "Getting to the Top" reflect their orientation. There are six that deal with personal finances, and another six on miscellaneous subjects, such as "Wine and Cheese—the Perfect Partners."

The remainder, 20 in all, are more or less about matters of explicit Jewish interest. Here we have one each on marriage, intermarriage and conversion; one on the *Bet Din* (religious court), one on the *mikveh* (ritual bath), one on the woman in traditional Judaism; one is about the *havurah* (Jewish fellowship) and another on Jewish spirituality and another on Reconstructionism; there's one on genealogy, and one on Jewish travel, and one on Israeli artists; three are Bible-based, and four deal, more or less, with "current" issues—Jewish PACs, "American Jewish Women—Then and Now," "How to Instill Judaism in Kids" and "Giving Honor and Dignity to the Jewish Dead."

There's a long-standing debate in the Jewish community about the propriety and wisdom of Jewish sponsorship of essentially secular projects. Why should Jews, as Jews, meet to discuss retirement planning? To which the answer is that Jews are, or try to be, a community, and not merely a group that meets for limited purposes. On the whole, I accept this answer, believe that we may share all our interests without feeling that the sharing must have explicit Jewish content, be Jewishly "justifiable."

So if I have problems with the 57 seminars that have been so carefully planned, so enthusiastically designed to offer something for everybody, those problems are not about what they include, but about what they exclude. Every presentation by a Jewish agency or institution is, in its way, a statement about what matters to Jews. With 57 presentations, we may also draw some conclusions about what does not matter.

Among those the program is meant to reach, are there none who would be turned on by a seminar on economic justice, or on the relationship between ritual and ethics, or on national health insurance, or on relations between the Jewish community and the black, or the Hispanic, or, for that matter, the Italian, Greek, Polish or Irish community? None concerned with Central America, none with famine in Ethiopia, none with nuclear proliferation, none with terrorism? None with apartheid in South Africa, or divestment? None with Simpson-Mazzoli, none with the bag ladies and street people?

How can it be that we accept that Jews—as Jews—are entitled to talk together, and care together, about wine and cheese ("An open discussion on pairing the perfect wine and cheese as well as when and where to serve the combination") but not about welfare and abortion and church-state relations?

Well, maybe it's just a ruse to attract the young, to seduce them into the building; once seduced, we'll start feeding them the other stuff, the stuff from the real agenda. There is one clue that points in that direction: Except for a seminar on Israeli artists, there's not a single seminar on Israel. There's nothing on Israel's economy, or its politics, or its conflict with its neighbors. Yet it simply cannot be the case that the sponsors are indifferent to Israel. It must, therefore, be that the sponsors assume that those they mean to attract are indifferent—to Israel, as also to the whole of the civic culture.

Some of them surely are. But we cannot have failed so miserably in our educational effort that all of them are. By implying such widespread indifference, we alienate those non-indifferent young who don't give a tinker's damn about "Applying Business Techniques to Managing Your Life"—and we encourage the indifferent young to think they're whole, that the top is where the good life is and that getting there is all that counts.

If the civic culture is to be repaired, if a new generation is to be inducted into the ethic of civic responsibility and given the opportunity to experience its intensity, we shall have to overcome the ethic of futility and indifference that now subverts it.

That, as it happens, is a Jewish agenda. Jewish survival is incompatible with an ethic of futility, cannot be protected where there is no sense of public purpose, of a civic culture.

Among other things, MOMENT tries to be about Jewish survival. The surest way to subvert that survival is to trivialize the Jewish agenda; the surest way to protect it is to concentrate on the redemptive understandings that have characterized Jewish thought through the ages, and on the ways in which those understandings can inform our lives. Ways like sweeping floors in workshops for the elderly. Yes, and ways like "Promoting a Healthy Sexuality" and "Giving Honor and Dignity to the Jewish Dead" and giving food to the African hungry and promoting justice for the South African blacks and worrying about how to resolve the conflict between Arab and Jew in the Middle East.

Which is a different way of saying that a people that is preoccupied with survival for survival's sake is not likely to survive. It is the ambitions of a people that sustain it—if those ambitions are sufficiently uplifting and inspiring to excite the imagination and loyalty of its members. And if they are insistently and persuasively communicated.

The language we speak is, therefore, a matter of considerable importance in our ongoing effort. The figures of speech we invent and employ tell a good deal about us—as, even more simply, does our basic vocabulary.

Some years ago, the "hot" text for teaching Hebrew was something called *Elef Milim*—a one thousand word vocabulary list that was supposed to prepare the student for simple communication in Hebrew. As best I can recall, successful completion of the text enabled the visitor to Israel to find a bathroom or order a salami sandwich.

There *is* a basic Jewish vocabulary, a list of words that has the capacity to unite Jews wherever they are. But it is not about food and comfort stations. It is about hunger and justice, about melancholy and ecstasy and, above all, about hope. It includes such words as *almanah* and *yatom*—the widow and the orphan—as *tzedakah* and *tz'niyut*—righteousness and modesty—and so forth, a thousand words and more.

What have Jews, as Jews, to do with such a vocabulary?

When all the dreams are fractured, you can desist from dreaming—or you can try to heal the fractures. Were we to stop using the vocabulary we invented, a vocabulary that has moved humankind to pity for more than two millenia, we would begin to forget why we are and want to be who we are.

When, for fear Club Med is as close as they can come to community, we withhold the words from our young, we insult, then injure them; we leave them ignorant of the rich inheritance that is theirs by right. Nor are the words alone enough: Save as we seek to live our language, we become castaways from past and future; we are, all of us, diminished.

Among other things, MOMENT tries to sustain the classic Jewish vocabulary, that there may flourish a Jewish civic culture, that through the ongoing enrichment of that culture Jewish dreams be sustained and life be preserved. And that thereby, the repair of the world go forward. ✱