


instead, she reimagines an as yet unapproachable Judaism that awaits refashioning in the face of new challenges and obstacles.

Ross asks us to believe that the resilience

and depth of Judaism will be sustained in new ways by the energy and enthusiasm of the next generation — male and female — whose task it is to renovate the palace again. 

Orthodoxy, Truth, and Theology

Meir Soloveichik

DAVID GELERNTER, in an essay in *Commentary*, has noted that the need for a concise delineation of Jewish theology has never been greater. As he fetchingly puts it, in earlier times, troubled Jews demanded, “I want to be Jewish but don’t know how; tell me.” The great codes of Jewish law, including Maimonides’ *Mishneh Torah* and the *Shulhan Arukh*, were compiled in response to such questions. Today, Gelernter continues, Jews disconnected from their identity have a different question: no longer “I want to be Jewish but don’t know how; tell me,” but rather, “I want to want to be Jewish but I don’t know how.” Gelernter’s point is that if more of today’s Jews are to be drawn to Jewish observance, then not only halakhic writings, but also theological ones are vital; a compelling case must be made for *why* one ought to desire to live a Jewish life.

Over the past half century, the Jewish world has witnessed a resurgence of Jewish Orthodoxy and the emergence of what Dr. Haym Soloveitchik has called the “text culture.” Those already interested in living an observant Jewish life have any number of books at their disposal to guide them in the minutiae of the halakhah from the laws of kashrut, to Shabbat, to family purity, all concisely delineated in several languages. At the same time, however, notwithstanding the flowering of the “text culture,” eloquent works of Orthodox Jewish theology are few and far between. Traditional Judaism must build on its current success by heeding Gelernter’s call. Decades ago, the Christian writer C.S. Lewis published a book entitled *Mere Christianity*, explaining the basic doctrines of the Christian faith and making the case for Christianity in a persuasive manner. Though today, thankfully, Orthodox halakhists abound, there is a great need for Orthodoxy to produce its own C.S. Lewis, who could set out in a clear and compelling manner the theological tenets of Judaism.

Were an Orthodox theologian to compose such a book, what would be uniquely Orthodox about its theology? Many things, but most importantly an Orthodox account of Jewish

dogma must defend the traditional conception of religious truth: that truth ought to be sought and that it has been most completely vouchsafed to one religion. Such an account must further insist on defending the argument that Judaism represents the ultimate truth, that its tenets are more true than the beliefs of any other faith, and that Jewish Orthodoxy embodies a more authentic account of Judaism than any other.


This emphasis on the often exclusive nature of religious truth is not stressed in the writings of many prominent 20th-century Jewish theologians. Does not every religion, Abraham Joshua Heschel asked in *No Religion is an Island*, “maintain the claim to be true, and is not truth exclusive?” Heschel answers that the voice of God “reaches the spirit of man in a variety of ways, in a multiplicity of languages. One truth comes to expression in many ways of understanding.” A similar version of this approach can be found in the worldview of the theologian David Hartman. After the attacks of September 11, Hartman told the *New York Times*’ Thomas Friedman that, “All faiths that come out of the biblical tradition — Judaism, Christianity, and Islam — have the tendency to believe that they have the exclusive truth.” What is needed, argued Hartman, is “an ideology of pluralism,” the notion “that my faith can be nurtured without claiming exclusive truth.”

This is an approach that Orthodoxy cannot accept. Religions are not in any way equally true, and Judaism has never thought of itself as one of many expressions of a larger truth. The religions that have grown in America have been those that have argued that they offer adherents the truth in a way that no one else can. C.S. Lewis was successful not only because of his gift for graceful prose, but also because he was willing to make the case that Christianity made more sense and was truer than any other worldview. Similarly, the Orthodox theologian must make the case for the essential aspects of the Jewish belief: of a God who created the world and made man in

Meir Soloveichik is Assistant Rabbi at Congregation Kehilath Jeshurun in Manhattan and a doctoral fellow in Philosophy of Religion at Princeton University. He is a contributing editor of *Azure*, the journal of Jewish thought published by the Shalem Center in Jerusalem.

His image; of a Torah divinely composed and commanded; of Abraham's children, uniquely loved by God, chosen as monotheistic messengers to humanity and as a light unto the nations. He or she must explain why Judaism — not Christianity and not secularism — offers the truest approach.

At the same time, another task falls to the Orthodox theologian: to argue that the traditional approach to religious truth in no way incites intolerance; that a traditional approach to truth can serve as the foundation of a Jew's familial love for all Jews and indeed respect for all humanity. One particularly inspiring example of this is the writings of Michael Wyschogrod, an Orthodox Jew whose writing presents an unabashed defense of the chosenness of the Jewish people and God's unique

love for them. At the same time, he insists that that Bible indicates God's love for other nations and that God's sanctification of Israel creates familial bonds between Jews that no amount of disagreement can sever. For the Orthodox Jew, it is precisely belief in the Bible that underlies Orthodoxy's insistence on the inherent dignity of man, and it is the truth of the chosenness of Israel that binds an Orthodox Jew eternally to all members of the Jewish people. A statement of Richard John Neuhaus, a Catholic theologian, has great relevance to the proper approach of an Orthodox Jewish theology: "There is a very big difference between tolerating others because nobody has the truth and being convinced of the truth that we are to love those with whom we disagree about the truth." 

A Jewish Theology of Interfaith Relations

Elliot N. Dorff

JEWES HAVE HISTORICALLY had a fractious and, in some cases, lethal relationship with Christians and, to a lesser extent, Muslims. The small percentage of Jews who lived in India, China, or Japan fared better in interfacing with the people practicing Asian religions, for those are inclusive rather than exclusive. That is, in Asia, practicing one religion does not preclude someone from practicing another religion as well; in fact, in Japan it is common for people to be both Buddhists and Taoists at different times of their day or week. As a result, Jews were just another religion to add to the mix. In the West, however, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam all assert that affiliating with one of them precludes affiliation with any other religion. Furthermore, significant segments of each community believe that its religion is the only way that a person can fulfill God's will for humanity. That has led to forceful, and sometimes legally and militarily enforced, missionary projects by the followers of Christianity and Islam. Judaism has refrained from proselytizing, in part for lack of power and in part because, theologically, the rabbis asserted that only Jews are subject to the full duties of God's Covenant with Israel, that God created a separate covenant with the children of Noah for non-Jews, and that, therefore, non-Jews need not become Jewish to do what God wants of them.

The Enlightenment — with its assertion that religion is a private affair and that, as in

the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, governments should neither establish a state religion nor interfere with the free exercise of religion — has drastically changed the context for Jews' relationships with Christians. Even in the United States, it took two centuries for these principles genuinely to become part of American law and practice, and American Jews still worry about the effects of evangelical Christianity on the current Administration. Still, Jews and other non-Christians now enjoy a level of religious freedom and nondiscrimination in this country truly unprecedented in the annals of human history. The same cannot be said for Jews living in Muslim countries (with the possible exception of Turkey), for the Muslims by and large have not subjected their faith to critical scholarship and do not embrace Enlightenment principles of individual rights and religious freedom. They instead continue a triumphalist stance toward all other religions, making anything but hostile relations with them hard to achieve. Despite American principles, some forms of Christianity even in this country embrace the same kind of triumphalism, actively seeking to convert Jews to Christianity.

How, then, should Jews interact with non-Jews, especially with the Christians and Muslims that we are most likely to encounter? While we must continue to defend ourselves from the onslaughts of those who would do us harm, we must also revise our own Jewish

Rabbi Elliot N. Dorff, PhD, is Rector and Distinguished Professor of Philosophy at the University of Judaism. He has been part of the Priest-Rabbi Dialogue sponsored by the Archdiocese of Los Angeles and the Board of Rabbis of Southern California since 1973, a dialogue he has co-chaired since 1990. Dorff served as faculty advisor from 1972 to 1994 to Intersem, a dialogue for seminary students from five seminaries in Southern California, and he is Vice President of the Academy of Judaic, Christian, and Islamic Studies headquartered at UCLA.

December 2005
Tevet 5766

To subscribe: 877-568-SHMA
www.shma.com