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# Sh'ma

A JOURNAL OF JEWISH RESPONSIBILITY

## In this issue

**Sometimes we  
have to look  
back to go  
forward.**

**In this issue,  
different voices  
do just that to  
teach us how  
to shape  
tomorrow.**

**Welcome to  
our college  
students. We're  
glad to have you  
with us.**

## Farewell to modernity Arnold Jacob Wolf

The subject of a 1994 convocation sponsored by the Joint Commission on Continuing Education of the CCAR and the Alumni Association of the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion was "Judaism, Modernity and Post-Modernity", a rubric vague and inclusive enough to open many doors.

Still, a real issue was being considered and that issue demarks a watershed in which the modernist age in which Reform Judaism emerged and triumphed (a secular age, mildly skeptical, passionately devoted to reasoned truth in science and, where possible, also in religion) is apparently giving way to a deconstructed pluralism of non-foundational claims and to personal concerns that are as suspicious of science as of institutional religion; a mood of despair modified by erratic apocalypticism. In the great liberal age from Mendelssohn to Borowitz, our movement built an edifice of imposing weight and beauty, but the foundations of the building are now under siege and the whole totters toward a fall.

### The Search For Firmer Ground

I have come to regret the relentlessly *aggadic* and historicist emphasis of much of our new scholarship, calling Bialik and Leo Strauss to testify that we still need norms and principles that are trans-historical if we are to place our decisions on a firm basis. Stories and relativizing theories will no longer do. "Aggadic doing" (Rosenzweig) will no longer suffice. Our Reform movement has for too long rested

on the whimsical conclusions of a Julian Morgenstern or the anti-halakhic preference for *minhag* of a Solomon Freehof. How, if at all, can we recover Jewish law without a return to pre-modern Orthodoxy and how can we reconcile the achievements of more than a century of liberal enlightenment with firm rabbinic strategies that might outlast post-modernism's threat to all values? We must overcome Reform's original sin—"pick and choose" Paulinism—or die.

### The Limits Of Self-Discovery

The Samuel Goldenson lecture (designed by that paragon of classical Reform Judaism to honor our prophetic tradition) was given, ironically, by a preeminent Reconstructionist scholar whose expertise is in Hasidism and who defended vigorously the incipient post-modern revolution, Arthur Green, now professor at Brandeis. For Green, the old game of "vertical" religion with claims to know the mind of the deity, a religion which instructs humble believers in the certainty of its principles and its doctrine—that game is over. From now on, religion must be personal,

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horizontal. It will be justified only by direct, unmediated experience. Judaism will have to learn from the eastern religions something about meditation, spirituality and inwardness. Green's model for post-modernism was a young woman who advertised in a Jewish newspaper for a date (or a husband) and described herself as "spiritual but not religious". She is, he said, prototypically, our new Jew.

Gone, then, are preoccupations with truth or certainty, with strategies of control or self-denial, with theology in the old sense, and prayer, not only in its traditional but also in its Reform versions. We must now embrace without reservation a new opportunity for self-discovery and individual choice in post-religious mysticism. So went the post-modernist scenario.

### Resisting The Lure Of Immanence

Our colleague Daniel Polish raised some deeply undermining questions about Green's proposals. Syncretism, anti-intellectualism, trans-ethical or sub-ethical commitment, above all, what Steven Schwarzschild called "the lure of immanence"—all these typify the Green model for a courageous post-modern Judaism. Neo-mystical Judaism has its delights, but it fails as abjectly as did Reform to produce discipline, commitment or loyalty.

It was perhaps inevitable that our colleague Clifford Librach concluded the evening with the first defense of pristine neo-conservative political values I have ever heard in a CCAR meeting, denouncing multiculturalism, sentimental judges and lenient juries, as well as affirmative action, all terrible threats to the integrity of the Jewish community. He continued his critique in *Sh'ma*. If this be post-modernism (and I think there is, indeed, an intrinsic relationship), give me the old time religion any day. Social justice, it turns out, also requires a standard above self-interest, a standard which some of us still identify with God. Post-modernism will bring down the liberal social project together with its vulnerable source of authority.

### Turning Toward An Uncertain Future

From one point of view the Convocation was too little and too late. The great moment of post-modernism has passed. The work of Foucault and Derrida, of revolutionary deconstructionism and the post-modern probe into a new world, is, for all practical purposes, over. As usual, we American liberals felt a new spirit only when it had passed us by.

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But that is not the whole story. If Derrida is somewhat *passé*, Levinas is not. If the extravagances and nihilism of the post-modern movement are of no use to us, its questions and its beginning-point are profoundly relevant. All of us are now more doubtful about science and politics and ourselves. We Jews are, in some sense, in a truly post-modern situation, at least since the Holocaust, and it is about time we try to come to terms with our new predicament.

Nor is that all. Historicism, the seedbed of liberal Judaism is also under powerful attack. We no longer can commit the genetic fallacy which believed wrongly that if we can trace an idea to its source we thereby uncover its truth. We no longer believe that the history of Judaism necessarily constitutes the uncovering of its ethos or the unfolding of its destiny. History, if corrigible, even subjective, is untrustworthy as a guide and useless as a standard. We ourselves must impose upon the ambiguous

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record of our past meanings that come from beyond mere documentation. We shall have to find a God who, no longer Lord of history, is still beyond its depredations.

Post-modernism is erratic, anti-foundational, sometimes cynical in its disbeliefs, abhorring structure and coherence. But there is also this wave of questioning, a mood of experimentation and a style of radical reconsideration that seems congenial to our own most courageous inclinations. Insofar as we are left-liberals, we must be ready to revise liberalism and to overthrow our own past, to reform Reform. The liberal certainties are no longer secure. We must live with uncertainty from now on. Insofar as we are Jews, we lust for more, not less, structure and for more, not less, law. Foucault and Derrida with their suicidal recklessness and their total negations, cannot be our guides, but they may stimulate us to dump the last, sad vestiges of our liberalistic past and to embark on the new, without illusion or expectation.

Our liberal convocation alerted us to dangers but also to cues from the post-modern. It was a valuable confrontation of conservative politics with anti-theology, of history seen as narrative against God as the great post-historical Power. It, naturally, brought us no closure, but it showed us the true possibility of openness and the grace, as well as the hazards, of finally slipping our modernist moorings, trusting our future to those unknown Jews who will come after us. □

## The spirit of jewish ethics

Louis E. Newman

Ethics is about fundamental values—that which we believe gives life ultimate meaning and purpose—and about how to orient our lives around those values. Constructing a Jewish ethic, then, requires that we reflect on these questions of ultimate meaning and purpose in the context of our own experience and in light of the collective experience of the Jewish people.

For traditionalists, such questions are answered in terms of divine revelation, rabbinic tradition and halakhic precedent. For them, doing Jewish ethics is a matter—by no means a simple one—of analyzing and interpreting the textual tradition in relation to moral problems in the present. In general, liberals—and I include myself among them—have also created their ethics by interpreting Judaism and its texts, but on the assumption that the

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essential moral truths of Judaism and those of liberalism are compatible. When conflicts between values arise, liberals often reread the texts, reinterpret traditional Jewish values, so as to preserve the synthesis.

## Rediscovering Our Spiritual Roots

But this standard approach to liberal Jewish ethics suffers from an important, and seldom noted, shortcoming. Liberals who interpret the tradition have lost touch with the very religious sensibilities which animated it. Those traditional texts were written by people (almost exclusively men, as we know) whose lives were infused with Jewish religiosity. They were not, of course, all saintly. But they did understand themselves as standing in relationship with God, saw the world and themselves as creatures of a benevolent Creator, and made moral choices in the context of their religious experience. By comparison, what liberal Jewish ethics lacks is a grounding in Jewish spiritual life.

The real challenge of doing liberal Jewish ethics, then, is to rediscover our spiritual roots, deepen our religious sensitivities, so that our ethics, like those of our predecessors in generations past, becomes an expression of genuine Jewish religious experience. And that, I believe, is a far more formidable challenge than simply reinterpreting texts. Let me offer a couple examples of how we might attempt to face it.

Anyone who has witnessed the birth of a child knows the sense of wonder and awe which we experience in the presence of new life. Similarly, attending to someone at the moment when they draw their last breath, we recognize a force greater than ourselves to which we must all one day submit. The mysteries of life and death represent the most basic conditions of human existence and, accordingly, our tradition calls our attention to them in particularly powerful ways.

## A Sense Of Awe

Traditionally, one of the first prayers recited upon waking is, “My God, the soul which you have given me is pure, you created it, you formed it, you breathed it into me, you preserve it within me. In the future you will take it from me and return it to me in the world to come. So long as my soul is within me, I am grateful to you, O Lord, my God and God of my ancestors....” To recite these words is to confront daily a reality most of us sense only in the immediate presence of birth or death; life is really only loaned to us, it is not a “thing” to be managed or manipulated, but a precious gift for which we must be continually and profoundly grateful.