

Judaism



A Way of Being

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I

Picturing Judaism

What is it about Judaism that is transfixing enough to have kept a brilliant, fractious, bickering, relentlessly skeptical people alive for three thousand years, made them the senior nation of the Western world, and turned them into a marvel and (too often) an obsession to so many of their fellow human beings?

Answering that question is the goal of this book. But first we American Jews must face reality. Judaism may be transfixing, but the numbers speak for themselves: America's Jewish community is shrinking relentlessly. It is melting like old snow into warm American earth. Except for Orthodox Jews, who are the most passionate but smallest part of the community, American Judaism might well be gone (or almost gone) within a generation or two.

Why? Why do so few American Jews feel close to Judaism? Why do so few teach it to their children, study the Bible or the rabbinic classics, go to synagogue, keep the Sabbath in any way at all, or feel the pride, privilege, and glory of belonging to a nation unique in history? Why do so many intermarry

with no thought of bringing their spouses or children into the Jewish community?

Largely, I believe, because Judaism itself strikes so many Jews nowadays as strange and forbidding, or obsolete and pointless, or so vague and bland that its basic ethical teachings seem like mere truisms.

Which is hardly surprising, and gets us right back to the purpose of this book. Comprehending Judaism requires that we see it whole. The same holds for any object—*Hamlet*, baseball, the American constitution; “comprehending” *means* “seeing whole.” But most books on Judaism—and this is no reflection on the learning or wisdom of my fellow authors—focus on only one part of the grand scheme. They deal with Jewish prayer, history, ritual, literature, art, theology, philosophy. What we lack is the grand scheme itself: the big picture that encompasses all these elements; the underlying idea.

No author can master all this vast intellectual acreage. Certainly I have not, and never could. Nor is it possible that any one theme can meet our requirements. To see Judaism whole, we need a group of themes—and not just any group will do. Our group must have a special property: when you add up its separate themes in your mind, a vision of the whole must emerge like mist over a lake, or a genie from a magic lamp. The group must be an “emergent system,” to borrow a useful term from philosophy and science. The whole must be more than the sum of its parts. A mosaic, for example, is an emergent system. No single tile can make you see the bird, tree, or inscription that is visible when you see all the tiles together, simultaneously. (Augustine uses the image of a mosaic in a broadly related way, borrowed from Plotinus: he describes the universe as a mosaic in which God’s presence is manifest only if you see all the tiles together.)¹

I will present in this book an emergent system of four themes. Each theme in the group must itself have a special property. Each must be an *image*, to be seen directly or imagined. Many people think in images most of the time, and nearly everyone does occasionally. Images are the stuff of thought. None of my four theme-images is a principle that has been formulated by scholars. Each is a thought, taken from its natural setting inside the mind and put down on paper as faithfully as possible. My basic themes take the form of images because Judaism is less a system of belief than a way of living, a particular texture of time. Each of my four themes is a mental image that accumulates over time in the mind of a practicing Jew. Virtually all observant Jews will recognize these themes.

In the past such mental images have rarely been described. Often they are not formulated or reduced to words even in the thinker's own mind. But the time has come; today these theme-images must be described in words.

Why? Because unless the essence of Judaism is written down as plainly as can be, the loosening grip most American Jews maintain on the religion of their ancestors will fail completely, and the community will plummet into the anonymous depths of history. ("How art thou fallen from heaven, O Daystar son of morning!" [Isaiah 14:12].)

For now, Zionism holds the Jewish community together, but cannot do so forever. Zionism—love of the land and the state of Israel—is an integral and foundational part of Judaism. It appears in each one of my themes. Taken on its own, it is a rudimentary religion in itself. Its appeal is direct and emotional, and it has the power to hold Jewish minds in rough alignment during a temporary spiritual power outage. But unless the main generator comes back online, unless Judaism as a whole reemerges in all its grandeur and sublimity, the Jewish

community will fall apart. If that should happen, the loss would be mankind's.

These basic image-themes must be written down for another reason too. Jews rarely do well at explaining Judaism to Gentiles. Yet Gentiles have often been curious about this ancient faith, the one great Western religion whose central purpose is *not* to prepare believers for salvation in the life to come but to sanctify life on earth. Some Gentiles are drawn not just by curiosity but by personal attachments or spiritual longings. They, too, need the big picture.

So it is time to write down the essence of Judaism as an “emergent system” of nuanced image-themes, each as richly multilayered as a coppery peach or a vivid blue in a Titian painting built of glaze upon glaze upon glaze. By describing these image-themes, I hope to make it possible for readers to superimpose or synthesize them in their own minds—thereby arriving at Judaism seen whole.

When the destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem forced an end to the sacrificial offerings of the priests and Levites, the Talmud asked how *avodah*—God's service—could possibly continue. Its reply: sacrificial offerings must now be replaced by offerings “that are in the heart”—meaning (says the Talmud, Ta'anit 2a), by prayer. Although “prayer” in this passage means specifically the Eighteen Blessings (Judaism's most important prayer), *avodah she'ba'lev*, “service in the heart,” came to mean prayer in general. Other authorities connect the phrase “service in the heart” with biblical verses calling for spiritual, heartfelt worship. Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai (to whom I return) uses the phrase in a midrash to explain the verse “to serve Him with all your heart.” The medieval commentator and grammarian David Kimchi, known as the Radak, cites the phrase in connection with Isaiah's famous charge to

the gravely ill King Hezekiah (“Set thine house in order, for thou shalt die”), and Hezekiah’s response: “I beseech thee, O Lord, remember now how I have walked before thee in truth and with a perfect heart” (II Kings 20:1, 20:3). Hezekiah is referring, writes the Radak, to his “service in the heart.”

Now, Judaism long ago wrote down its two sacred Torahs, the *Torah she’bikhtav*, or “written Torah,” meaning the Torah or Bible proper, and the *Torah she’b’al peh*, the “spoken Torah,” meaning the Talmud and associated rabbinic writings. It has yet to write down the *Torah she’ba’lev*, or “Torah of the heart”—Judaism seen whole. Theology in general is less central to Judaism than to the other great Western religions. Practice, the rabbis insist, comes first; illumination later. (In the words of a midrash, “Let a man first do good deeds, and then ask God for knowledge of Torah; let a man first act as the righteous and the upright act, and then let him ask God for wisdom; let a man first grasp the way of humility, and then ask God for understanding.”) Rabbi Joseph Dov Soloveitchik, preeminent philosopher of modern rabbinic Judaism, taught that (in Rabbi Isadore Twersky’s words), “The religious consciousness is not to be subservient to or derivative from any philosophic impetus.” Judaism’s views of God and man develop privately in the mind of each active Jew—which makes these beliefs vivid to practicing Jews but hard to communicate to anyone else, Jew or Gentile.

Someday a comprehensive *Torah she’ba’lev* will exist, an authoritative rendering of Judaism-as-a-whole that all will acknowledge. My book is a tentative beginning of a process that one day, God willing, will culminate in a work (no doubt by many authors) that will appear routinely in every Jewish library and that might be called, for short, *Torat ha-lev*, the Torah of the mind and heart.

So this book presents four theme-images of Judaism, laid out in individual chapters. Each of the four captures all of Judaism from a certain angle; each is a microcosm of Judaism.

The four themes answer four basic questions.

First: Why does Judaism have such intricate ceremonies and laws? Why can't Jews treat religion as a personal matter between man and God, with no complex rule-book butting in? And a larger version of the same question: Jewish law covers everything from weddings to legal procedure in criminal cases, from the preparation of kosher food to the exact manner in which a Torah scroll must be written. Is there an underlying idea in all this mass of detail?

My first theme, "Separation," suggests answers.

Second: How can a Jew understand and deal with a God as abstract and indescribable as the unique God of Judaism? Doesn't this pure and deep but difficult view doom Judaism to be a cold, abstruse, forbidding religion, in which man and God are kept apart by an impermeable barrier or an infinite gap? The answers (or at least possible answers) are inherent in my second theme, "Veil."

Third: Insofar as its public ceremonies are conducted by males, normative Judaism seems to be a religion for men. Is Judaism prejudiced against women? Assuming we reject the idea that women are in any way inferior, aren't we forced to demand basic changes to traditional Judaism? Or, in more positive terms: How does Judaism understand sexuality, the family, and relationships between man and woman in general? Answers to these questions emerge from my third theme, "Perfect Asymmetry."

Finally, and hardest by far: The deepest problem any religious believer faces is the question of evil in light of God's justice. Shakespeare framed it best in *Macbeth*, in Macduff's

cry of rage and grief when he learns that his wife and children have been murdered. “*Did heaven look on and would not take their part?*”

How can we accept the simultaneous existence of a just, all-powerful God and a merciless world? Judaism’s answer—it is not a pat answer, and not everyone will find it easy or even possible to accept—is framed in my final theme, “Inward Pilgrimage.”

These, in sum, are my themes and their associated questions: (1) Separation: What is the point of halakha, the Jewish religious law? (2) Veil: How can man be in touch with the transcendent, ineffable Lord as Judaism conceives Him? (3) Perfect asymmetry: What is the family’s role in normative Judaism, and is woman’s role (as it seems to many people) an inferior role? (4) Inward pilgrimage: How can Judaism reconcile an all-powerful, just, and merciful God with cruel reality?

In addressing these themes I do not attempt to summarize current thinking among theologians and philosophers of Judaism. I attempt instead to summarize Judaism itself. Many of my arguments may strike readers as novel, but I believe that my supporting evidence is solid; readers will judge for themselves.

Now I will reintroduce each of my four themes as an *image*. What sort of image is “separation,” or “perfect asymmetry”? I will answer by asking that you build each one in your mind step-by-step. (“My way is to conjure you,” says Rosalind in *As You Like It*.) For concreteness, you might imagine yourself in an amphitheater, gazing down at a stage on which shapes appear and sometimes blend together.

“Separation” first. Imagine a man in synagogue holding the Torah wide open overhead, one handle in each hand. (This