

**“OUR PLACE IN THE  
WORLD”**

**30 QUESTIONS ABOUT  
PROGRESSIVE JUDAISM**

## **Introduction**

The first version of '21 Questions and Answers about Progressive Judaism' was printed in 1969 and edited before being reissued in the 1990s. The Jewish community in our region has grown and so has our list of topics! Perhaps it is a reflection of the fact that our own congregational union has developed and that it now has affiliates beyond the shores of Australia and New Zealand. Israel is even more central to Jewish life than it was a generation ago. Our community is more open to religious questions. Paradoxically, the world Jewish community has seen a parallel growth in the influence of the ultra-Orthodox and Jewish secularism. Both liberal Judaism and mainstream orthodoxy have changed and there are new, and possibly more profound, points at issue.

This pamphlet is not an introduction to Jewish practice. The prologue is a very brief version of a collaborative theological essay published in *Manna*, the journal of the Sternberg Centre for (Reform) Judaism in Great Britain in Spring 1990. Many of the questions come from a pamphlet listing 30 questions published in Hebrew and Russian by our World Union for Progressive Judaism in Jerusalem in 1991 and the text has been recently extensively rewritten.

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5762/2002  
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## CONTENTS

|   |    |
|---|----|
| IT IS AN EXCITING GIFT TO BE A JEW.....   | 5  |
| TRUTH & PLURALISM .....   | 5  |
| DOUBT & CERTAINTY .....   | 6  |
| STARTING WITH PEOPLE WHERE THEY ARE.....  | 6  |
| SURELY THE WORDS ‘PROGRESSIVE’ AND ‘JUDAISM’ CONTRADICT EACH OTHER?.....  | 6  |
| COMMENTARY .....  | 7  |
| HOW DOES PROGRESSIVE JUDAISM DIFFER FROM ORTHODOX JUDAISM?.....   | 8  |
| COMMENTARY .....  | 9  |
| BUT SURELY ONLY ORTHODOX JEWS ARE REALLY RELIGIOUS! .....   | 9  |
| COMMENTARY .....  | 10 |
| WHAT IS OUR PLACE WITHIN THE JEWISH WORLD? .....  | 10 |
| WHAT DOES PROGRESSIVE JUDAISM TEACH ABOUT THE TORAH AND THE BIBLE?.....   | 11 |
| COMMENTARY .....  | 11 |
| SURELY EVERYTHING IN THE BIBLE IS TRUE?.....  | 12 |
| COMMENTARY .....  | 13 |
| HOW DO JEWS KNOW WHAT GOD WANTS US TO DO?.....  | 13 |
| COMMENTARY .....  | 14 |
| HOW DID PROGRESSIVE JUDAISM BEGIN? .....  | 14 |
| COMMENTARY .....  | 15 |
| HOW DID JUDAISM SURVIVE IN A CHRISTIAN WORLD?.....  | 16 |
| COMMENTARY .....  | 17 |
| DOES THIS MEAN THAT PROGRESSIVE JEWS DO NOT BELIEVE IN THE MESSIAH ? .....  | 17 |
| ARE THE WAYS IN WHICH PROGRESSIVE JEWS PRAY REALLY KOSHER?.....   | 18 |
| COMMENTARY .....  | 19 |
| WHAT IS THE STATUS OF WOMEN WITHIN PROGRESSIVE JUDAISM? .....   | 19 |
| DOES PROGRESSIVE JUDAISM WELCOME CONVERSION TO JUDAISM ?.....   | 21 |
| COMMENTARY .....  | 22 |
| WHAT DOES PROGRESSIVE JUDAISM HAVE TO SAY ABOUT HUMAN SEXUALITY .....   | 22 |
| COMMENTARY .....  | 23 |
| HOW CAN WE BE JEWS, AND TEACH OUR CHILDREN TO BE JEWS, AFTER ALL THAT HAS<br>HAPPENED TO THE JEWISH PEOPLE IN RECENT TIMES? ..... | 23 |
| COMMENTARY .....  | 24 |
| WHAT MAKES A PROGRESSIVE JEWISH PRAYER BOOK DIFFERENT?.....   | 24 |
| WHAT IS DIFFERENT ABOUT THE PROGRESSIVE JEWISH APPROACH TO HALAKHAH AND<br>RELIGIOUS OBSERVANCE? .....                            | 25 |
| COMMENTARY .....  | 26 |
| DO PROGRESSIVE JEWS ACCEPT THE LAWS OF THE TALMUD & THE SHULHAN ARUH.?.....   | 27 |
| COMMENTARY .....  | 28 |
| THE UNITY OF GOD IS SUCH AN ABSTRACT IDEA. HOW DOES IT MAKE A DIFFERENCE TO THE<br>WAY WE LIVE?.....                              | 28 |
| COMMENTARY .....  | 29 |
| HOW MUCH RELIGIOUS FREEDOM DO PEOPLE POSSESS? .....   | 29 |
| COMMENTARY .....  | 30 |
| WHAT DOES A PROGRESSIVE RABBI STUDY AND DO?.....  | 31 |

|   |    |
|---|----|
| COMMENTARY .....  | 32 |
| HOW DO PROGRESSIVE JEWS KEEP THE SHABBAT? .....   | 32 |
| HOW DO PROGRESSIVE JEWS REGARD THE FESTIVALS OF THE JEWISH YEAR? .....  | 33 |
| WHY DO PROGRESSIVE RABBIS MARRY IN THEIR SYNAGOGUES JEWS WHO CANNOT BE<br>MARRIED IN ORTHODOX SYNAGOGUES? ..... | 34 |
| HOW DOES PROGRESSIVE JUDAISM IN AUSTRALIA AND NEW ZEALAND REGARD<br>INTERMARRIAGE ? .....                       | 35 |
| WHAT IS THE ATTITUDE OF PROGRESSIVE JUDAISM TO NON-JEWS? .....  | 36 |
| HOW DOES PROGRESSIVE JUDAISM CONTRIBUTE TO JEWISH SURVIVAL? .....   | 36 |
| WHAT IS THE RELATIONSHIP OF PROGRESSIVE JUDAISM TO ZIONISM? .....   | 37 |
| COMMENTARY .....  | 38 |
| WHAT IS THE STATUS OF PROGRESSIVE JUDAISM IN ISRAEL? .....  | 38 |
| HOW MANY PROGRESSIVE JEWS ARE THERE? .....  | 39 |
| A GLOSSARY .....  | 39 |

## **IT IS AN EXCITING GIFT TO BE A JEW.**

Judaism is an ancient yet living tradition which has made an immense contribution to humanity. Our Jewish religious civilisation has been shaped in a number of different ways. Progressive Judaism is the response made to the ideas and style of the modern western world. Such cross-fertilisation is by no means unique in the Jewish experience. Wherever we have lived it has always occurred and, in each historical era, has revitalised Judaism.

There are many sinister aspects of modern life that are distressing. There is the belittlement of religious faith and tradition. There is the modern dethronement of God and the enthronement of materialism. There has been uncritical faith in science and scientific knowledge together with the abuse of technology as an instrument of human torture and destruction. We live in an era of oppressive and ruthless exploitation of human and natural resources solely for economic gain and the elevation of self-interest as the main determinant of human relations.

There are, however, many aspects of modernity that we can gladly embrace—its scholarship, its enunciation of individual human rights, its cultural pluralism, psychological insights and advances in many scientific and technological areas that all enhance the quality of human life. We have begun to understand that we have a responsibility to preserve the quality of life upon our planet and accept the discipline of being partners with the Creator and the custodians of creation. Whatever our ambivalence, the present is with us and we acknowledge that it forms our true starting point. We therefore recognise that modernity has brought both good and bad to the world. Judaism believes it is essential to live in the world, adopting a stance described as one of ‘creative maladjustment’.

The twentieth century brought with its technology a parallel world of suffering. The meeting between Judaism and the world has not always been a positive experience. Nevertheless, progressive Jews do not believe that we can fulfil our obligations as Jews by turning our back on the modern world and seeking survival through isolation. We value our difference and distinctiveness but do not wish to preserve it at the expense of separating ourselves from the wider community.

## **TRUTH & PLURALISM**

We understand that truth, which we equate with the Divine reality and the Divine will for the world, is multi-faceted and that no single expression of Judaism, or of any other religion, can encompass the mystery of the creative energy and the intelligence implicit in the universe.

We acknowledge that any form of religion is, in a sense, provisional. No single or lone expression of Judaism can accommodate all Jews in all places at all times. We also understand that Judaism does not possess a monopoly on truth: truth may be found in other religious traditions and truth is also to be found through teachers and disciplines that may have no formal religious label. The religious search for meaning has woven a great tapestry that has strands of many colours.

## **DOUBT & CERTAINTY**

We recognise that a significant level of religious doubt is endemic to modern thinking. The quest for religious meaning has been continuous ever since Abraham and Sarah set off on their journey for a distant Promised Land. This emphasis on the search is a healthy antidote to the certainties which previous generations often held about truth and is a corrective to the plague of fanaticism and fundamentalism which defaces the religious world in our time.

Nevertheless, we acknowledge that many Jews today are less certain than we imagine preceding generations to have been about belief in God. Many others have difficulties with prayer, even though some find the collective identification of public worship helpful. It is our duty to acknowledge that doubt and scepticism are part of a contemporary Jewish reality.

## **STARTING WITH PEOPLE WHERE THEY ARE**

Progressive Judaism starts with people where they are, and works in partnership with them, encouraging a fuller and more dynamic expression of their Judaism. We try 'to count people in'. We recognise that many factors affect the particular journey through life taken by each individual. At the very least, we can offer Jews who search for truth a Jewish 'home'. Our experience has shown that they will bring with them talents, insights and challenges from which everyone can benefit.

Judaism has never imposed a rigid creed on its adherents and the wisdom of such an approach is clearer today than ever. Progressive Judaism, indeed Judaism itself or any religious tradition, is a federation of views and a rich world of insights and nuances. We are committed to listen to each other with respect and to shun blinkered or selective vision. We recognise the need to be both more critical of ourselves and more respectful of Jews of differing opinions. We take to heart the injunction to care for one's soul and another person's wellbeing—not one's own wellbeing and another person's soul.

## **SURELY THE WORDS 'PROGRESSIVE' AND 'JUDAISM' CONTRADICT EACH OTHER?**

The opposite is true.

Judaism has never stood still. Jewish history is the story of religious continuity, creativity and diversity based on a revolutionary insight into the nature of the universe. Tradition teaches us that the Bible (Hebrew: Tanakh) does not begin with the story of Abraham, the first Jew, or Moses, the great teacher, but with Adam and Eve and the Garden of Eden, with Noah and the Flood, the Tower of Babel, the jealousy of Cain and the murder of Abel precisely because human destiny was seen as a shared adventure for people of all races and faiths. Only after those ancient stories have been told does Abraham emerge from the paganism of his birthplace in response to a divine command from a universal, invisible and ever present God. The earliest Biblical traditions tell stories about those first family members and their search to understand the meaning of a world in which there was One God. All of the characters in the pages of the Hebrew Bible are presented as human beings with their faults and virtues exposed for all to see. The Biblical period,

covering more than a thousand years of recorded history, traces the development of an increasingly complex and creative response to this insight.

There are three major themes which still animate Jewish life.

The first is the tradition of Moses, the law giver, who turned a community of slaves into a free community with an extraordinary legislative structure. In the context of the ancient world the Biblical religious innovations are startling. The idea was born of a Torah given at Sinai to a people bound in a covenant of trust to the One God. The Torah cannot be given to slaves. The commandments (Mitzvot) which deal with the ethical and ritual obligations of the Jew have no value if they are not freely chosen.

The second theme is the belief that God requires just and ethical behaviour and that the Universe is not indifferent to deeds of good and evil. The prophet Amos in the eighth century BCE presented a radical vision of social justice that validated ritual practice. Ritual action that was divorced from ethics had no purpose. In the sixth century BCE the prophet we call Deutero-Isaiah proclaimed the vision of a universal God. When the Jews returned from exile in Babylon, Ezra the Scribe presented his people with a Torah that was coherent and that carried within it the promise of blessing.

The third theme is equally radical. From the very first chapters of Biblical tradition it is clear that human beings are regarded as partners with God in the process of creation. This concept is called in Hebrew Tikkun Olam. Human beings have the capacity to make moral choices and we must constantly choose between good and evil. Our years may be limited but the consequences of our actions live on forever in a Universe in which nothing is ever lost.

#### **COMMENTARY**

The rabbis asked, ‘Why in the beginning did God only create one human being?’ And they answered, ‘To teach you that to destroy a single human soul is equivalent to destroying an entire world. And to sustain a single human soul is as though one sustains an entire world.’

Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5

The Midrash asks, ‘Why does the Torah begin with the letter Bet?’ Because Bet is the letter for berakhah—blessing. Because the letter Bet faces to the front with its arms open to the future. Because Bet means ‘house’ and there is no household without loving relationships. Because Bet is the symbol for the numeral ‘two’ and a real household should include two loving human beings.

See Midrash Rabbah 1:10

We respond to God daily: through public and private prayer, through study and through the performance of other Mitzvot—sacred obligations to God and other human beings. We strive for a faith that fortifies us through the vicissitudes of our lives—illness and healing, transgression and repentance, bereavement and consolation, despair and hope.

‘A Statement of Principles for Reform Judaism’, Pittsburgh, 1999

## HOW DOES PROGRESSIVE JUDAISM DIFFER FROM ORTHODOX JUDAISM?

The word 'orthodox' implies that there is only one correct way of acting and believing. There are orthodox Christians who believe that their mode of worship is divine and is the only correct path to God. There are fundamentalists of the three monotheistic faith traditions—Jewish, Moslem and Christian—who believe that God has given them a precise written book of instructions through divine revelation which must be obeyed to the letter. Non-orthodox Jews, Christians and Moslems do not, and cannot, believe this. Men and women who are religious liberals believe that fundamentalism contains within itself a logical flaw. How does a fundamentalist know that his or her version of revelation is the correct one? For someone who believes in the literal truth of a particular holy book (or books) a huge leap of faith is required that must begin with a rejection of other scriptures. The belief that finite human beings can know exactly what an Infinite God demands is not just astounding hubris (or hutzpah). As we can very clearly see, religious triumphalism is also very dangerous.

Modern Jewish experience includes examples of people who thought they knew exactly what God demanded them to do causing great tragedy. The fanatical assassin of Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin comes to mind. In the wider world the doomsday cults of Jonesville and Waco and the militancy of radical fundamentalists are grim warnings of the danger inherent in religious systems which are deaf to the still small voice of ethics and the constraints of logic.

There are a number of groups within the modern Jewish world whose fundamentalist belief systems stand in radical contrast to the rest of the Jewish world, both traditional and progressive. The best known group is Chabad, whose rebbe or spiritual leader, Rabbi Menachem Schneerson of Lubavitch, appeared to assume the mantle of Messianic leadership before his death in 1994. The followers of Chabad have adopted a theology of revelation, rabbinic authority and reincarnation which many orthodox and all progressive Jews find to be strange. So where does that leave the rest of us? Must we throw out the baby with the bath water?

Most people would see the ancient documents of their tradition as its foundation stones. The more we know about our past, the more we understand the context in which our tradition came to life. We can recognise the hands of differing editors from different centuries and clear signs of ideological conflict. Those conflicts are often not disguised. The ancient Hebrew tradition preferred to cherish differing versions of the same events and differing explanations of familiar human dilemmas.

As the Biblical period came to an end, more than two thousand years ago, our people expressed their religious convictions in different ways. There were the people who wrote the Dead Sea Scrolls. There were Zealots and Essenes, Pharisees and Sadducees and the Jews of the Hellenistic world. When Torah was debated dissenting opinions were recorded and treasured. Most famous of all were the debates between the followers of Hillel and Shammai who almost always disagreed. Yet in the final analysis it is said of these schools of thought that 'Both these and these are the words of the living God'. Judaism became a religion of tradition, discussion and dissent. And so it remains to this day. Of course, the matters for disagreement have changed through the centuries but we

need to remember that each person is finite and that God alone is Infinite. We should be committed to listen to each other with respect and to shun blinkered or selective vision.

#### COMMENTARY

A (Roman) emperor said to Rabbi Joshua the son of Hananiah, 'I wish to see your God.' He replied, 'You cannot see God.' 'Indeed,' said the emperor, 'I will see God.' Rabbi Joshua went and placed the emperor facing the sun during the summer solstice and said, 'Look up at the sun.' He replied, 'I cannot'. Said Rabbi Joshua, 'You cannot look at but one of the servants that attend the Holy One. How, then, can you presume to look upon the Divine Presence?'

The Talmud, Hullin 59b

A heathen once asked Rabbi Joshua son of Korh.a, 'Why did God choose a thorn bush from which to speak to Moses?' He answered, 'To teach you that no place is devoid of God's presence—even a thorn bush'.

The Midrash, Exodus Rabbah 2, 5

#### **BUT SURELY ONLY ORTHODOX JEWS ARE REALLY RELIGIOUS!**

It is orthodox Jewish belief that two Torahs were given at Sinai.

The Written Torah is to be found in the Pentateuch i.e. the first five books of the Bible. Accompanying this written, divinely-inspired text is an Oral Torah which defines in detail how the written text is to be obeyed. Every word and letter of these texts has been given by God. There may be disputes about the spelling of words or the order of some paragraphs but the tradition is immutable. The 'how' is the Halakhah (the way). Orthodox attitudes to modernity differ widely. Most H.asidic (pietistic) and H.aredi (ultra-orthodox) groups display their hostility to modernity by their distinctive dress and appearance. In Israel their continued use of Yiddish, the Judeo-German vernacular of the great mass of Jews in Eastern Europe before the Shoah, is a symbol of their antagonism to the speech of the everyday world and their rejection of the reborn status of modern Hebrew. There are H.aredi groups who violently oppose both the State of Israel and Zionism, seeing them as secular substitutes for the coming of the Messiah. There are other orthodox Jews who are strongly supportive of Israel and believe the reborn Jewish state to be the 'beginning of redemption.' Paradoxically, therefore, it is impossible to talk about one Jewish orthodoxy. It looks as though the principle of pluralism is built into all forms of Judaism.

Progressive Judaism welcomes modernity and understands that each generation will build its own religious approach based upon Jewish historical experience. Progressive Judaism does not believe that any text—even the Bible—is literally the word of God.

Progressive Judaism cannot be static. To remain intellectually alive we must remain open to the new ideas and to new discoveries. Jewish existence is dynamic and bound up with the fate of the Jewish people throughout the world. The Jewish sense of history binds us to those who came before us and those who will follow us. In this respect being Jewish is much more like belonging to an extended family than belonging to a particular religious denomination.

## COMMENTARY

I would be happiest if I could avoid the term 'Judaism' when I am asked my religion. Instead I would like to respond, 'I follow the Torah in a modern way'. I think that would identify me in a more authentic Jewish fashion than implying that I merely hold to the Jews' 'ism' or participate in Jewish folk culture. I would hope that people would hear in the word Torah my relation to God as part of the people of Israel, elaborated by its prophets and later teachers, and still being creatively developed by Jews in our community today. However, I am afraid most people will find my Torah-centred answer rather strange, so I shall go on using the word 'Judaism'. But I do not mean by it any relatively intellectualized or secular notion of what it means to be a Jew.

Rabbi Eugene B Borowitz

'Liberal Judaism', UAHC 1984

## WHAT IS OUR PLACE WITHIN THE JEWISH WORLD?

The big battle within the Jewish world is not really between orthodox and progressive Jews who are, after all, arguing about the same beliefs and values. Secularism defines Jewish identity in a totally different way and sees Jewish identity as bound up in some form of Jewish nationalism.

This, of course, produces a paradox because today there are six million citizens of the modern State of Israel and more than one million of those Israelis are not Jewish. They may speak Hebrew but they are Moslem or Christian or Druse. Millions of Jewish Israelis describe themselves as hilonim or secular and 'observe' the Jewish festivals and holydays as an opportunity to spend time on the beach or on vacation in Europe.

Secularism aside, the most important difference between the two contrasting religious expressions of Jewish life is undoubtedly the emphasis placed on the commandments (mitzvot) that link God and humanity. orthodox Judaism believes that there are 613 mitzvot to be found in the Torah and that all are divinely revealed. Their strict observance of those laws that are applicable today is therefore of paramount importance and cannot be altered in any way to suit modern needs or sensibilities.

It comes as a shock to discover that there is no Biblical Hebrew word for 'religion'. The religion of the Jews—Judaism—has always been expressed within a community. Laws, customs, ceremonies and shared history have shaped the faith of the Jewish People. Modern Hebrew had to invent a word for 'religious' and chose the adjective 'dati' which really means 'law abiding'. For progressive Jews the mitzvot help the individual draw closer to God. They reinforce the personal, ethical and social imperatives that govern human behaviour 'to shape the world in the image of the Divine' (Tikkun Olam b'Malkhut Shaddai). Jewish tradition reinforces a sense of holiness (Kedushah) week by week, festival after festival. We believe that the specific details of observance have always emerged through study and discussion and that it is very difficult to be a Jew alone. Progressive Jews affirm the value of this ancient system of law and tradition but gladly accept that life will bring about development and change.

## **WHAT DOES PROGRESSIVE JUDAISM TEACH ABOUT THE TORAH AND THE BIBLE?**

We, as progressive Jews, find ourselves confronted with a collection of ancient documents collected within one cover and misleadingly called ‘The Bible’. The Hebrew Tanakh is a far more accurate title because the three consonants are combined to represent the three major divisions: Torah, Nivi'im (prophets) and Khetuvim (writings). The Tanakh is therefore a library of books. Some books have been preserved in poetic forms and some in prose. Some books are the ancient court records of the Kings of Judah and Israel. A number of books mentioned in the Tanakh have been lost and only their titles remain. The messages and speeches of the ancient biblical prophets were courageously preserved. Their vivid words were often harsh but their vision was focused on the consequences of unjust and immoral actions.

Many biblical books and stories bear the imprint of their own time and the authors' sometimes fallible view of the world. As Jews, we affirm the notion that the Torah reveals to us the divine word of God. We interpret it as a work containing words of eternal truth, the whole of which is greater than the sum of its parts. The Tanakh is the written record of the beginning of Jewish existence and identity. Upon the ancient texts a vital religious civilisation has been built. The language and imagery of the Bible has shaped Jewish prayer and the way we speak about God. Our concept of social justice is defined by the Torah and by the prophets. Judaism has been shaped by the continuous intellectual engagement with the texts of the Tanakh. However, no text, no matter how ancient, can be used to justify the unjustifiable. The Hebrew Bible did not emerge in a cultural economic or religious vacuum. The Tanakh is not a text book for biology, science or for geo-political decisions. It is the Book of our People to be regarded with love and with respect.

For the Jew, the Bible is the heart of a vast related literature. It is a popular misconception that the “Old Testament” is all there is to Judaism. Even while the last Biblical books were being written, a new world of Jewish religious insight was coming into being. The Biblical period overlaps the development of the Diaspora, the rebuilding of the Temple and the emergence of Rabbinic Judaism.

With the 20th century return of the People of Israel to the land of Israel, the language of the Tanakh has become even more important and Biblical scholarship has flourished. Middle Eastern archaeology, the knowledge of ancient languages related to Hebrew, and the discovery of ancient scrolls in Egypt and in the caves beside the Dead Sea, have greatly expanded our knowledge and our appreciation of the past. The shared pursuit of Biblical scholarship and the study of Bible have narrowed religious differences and stimulated cooperation between scholars of differing faiths.

### **COMMENTARY**

The mystery of divine creativity is, of course, ultimately unknowable. The Genesis narrative does not seek to make intelligible what is beyond the human ken. To draw upon human language to explain that which is outside any model of human experience is inevitably to confront the inescapable limitations of any attempt to give verbal expression to this subject. For this reason alone, the narrative in its external form must reflect the

time and place of its composition. Thus it directs us to take account of the characteristic modes of literary expression current in ancient Israel... The biblical creation narrative is a document of faith. It is a quest for meaning and a statement of a religious position. It enunciates the fundamental postulates of the religion of Israel, the central ideas and concepts that animate the whole of biblical literature. Its quintessential teaching is that the universe is wholly the purposeful product of divine intelligence, that is of the one self-sufficient, self-existing God, who is a transcendent Being outside of nature and who is sovereign over space and time.

Nahum M Sarna: quoted from the Introduction to the first chapter of Genesis.

The Jewish Publication Society,

‘Torah Commentary’—Genesis, 1989

### **SURELY EVERYTHING IN THE BIBLE IS TRUE?**

Progressive Judaism cannot support religious laws that negate human dignity. Among Biblical passages that have shaped western society and its concepts concerning freedom and justice there are other passages that sanction the pillage or the extinction of neighbouring people. We are able to understand that these fragments from another time are flawed and rooted in ancient conflicts. We cannot believe that legislation commanding the stoning to death of a rebellious son or the torture of a woman suspected of adultery are of Divine origin. Biblical laws about the status of women, sexuality, the treatment of skin disease, the treatment of the maimed and the continuation of a special status for kohanim (priests) may be significant from a sociological (or archaeological) point of view but must be rejected on ethical grounds.

The Torah includes laws about slavery, leprosy, ritual impurity and the status of women that we now simply reject. Later Jewish law codes written in Babylonia fifteen hundred years ago or in Eastern Europe four hundred years ago contain regulations that are no longer relevant. We may leave it to other Jews to justify their relevance through ingenious discussions but the basic fact is that Judaism has evolved through the centuries. We are the first generation to face the ever-present possibility of nuclear destruction and ecological devastation. Scientific knowledge, freedom and moral choice allow us to choose between life and death, destruction or creativity. With the spread of nuclear technology, religious fundamentalism, like political fanaticism, poses a serious threat to the survival of life on this planet. We all affirm our commitment to Judaism, the cultural heritage of the Jewish people, through mitzvot—actions that mirror the still small voice we hear within us when we listen to the call of the covenant Israel made with God. A mitzvah is literally a divine commandment. Jewish tradition defines mitzvot and transforms simple decisions, such as kindling two lights on Shabbat or choosing not to eat pork or shellfish, into a religious act.

The Jewish calendar, the Jewish life cycle, the rhythm of Jewish prayer preserve our identity and add depth to our souls. Judaism embodies a whole network of historic Jewish values. Jews believe that we are each made in the image of the Divine. We have free will. We believe that our souls came pure from the Creator. Judaism teaches us that we must constantly choose between good and evil and that the reward of a good deed is another good deed. We are partners with God in the building of a better world. We understand

that justice, peace, love and freedom are spiritual values without which the world in which we live would shrivel and die. These spiritual values are as important to us as the oxygen we breathe. How do Jews know how to behave? By asking ourselves whether our chosen course of action will contribute positively to the spiritual life of the Jewish community and to the wider community. There are more than thirteen million Jews in the world and our individual choices may all be different but tradition has given us an extraordinary structure by which we may choose to shape our lives.

#### **COMMENTARY**

##### **‘A Morning Prayer’**

My God, the soul that You have given me is pure, for You created it. You formed it and made it live within me. You watch over it within me, and one day You will take it from me to everlasting life. My God and God of my ancestors, as long as the soul is within me, I will declare that You are the power of good deeds, the ruler of all creatures, possessing every soul. Blessed are You, who has planted within us eternal life.

From the Morning Service in the ‘Gates of Prayer’

#### **HOW DO JEWS KNOW WHAT GOD WANTS US TO DO?**

Life is awe-inspiring and miraculously complex. The rabbis of two thousand years ago marvelled at the fact that in the natural process of life and birth no two human beings were ever created exactly alike. The fact that individuals and communities have different characteristics was not a source of dismay even in ancient times. The story of Noah and his family following the flood clearly explains, in terms relevant to its antiquity, that the different races of the world were all related. Judaism accepts converts but has never felt that only Jews are ‘saved’.

We understand that there are many ways to worship God. We affirm the Jewish vision that each person is created in the Divine Image. We believe that we are endowed with free will and that we are capable of sublime goodness and are also capable of terrible evil. We are mortal but possess a sense of eternity. The Universe is not indifferent to us because we are part of the creative process of the Universe. All human beings can marvel at the complexity of creation and its ever expanding boundaries and yet feel able to enter into a direct, personal relationship with God. We affirm that there are lessons that can be drawn from human history. The great story or paradigm of Jewish existence is found within the exodus of the slaves from the prison house of Egypt. We celebrate this redemptive process on every Shabbat and when we sit around the Seder table at Passover. It is a drama of progress and defeat, triumph and tragedy that teaches us that there will come a time when the reign of peace and freedom, justice, love and peace will be established on earth. At the conclusion of every funeral and every service of worship the congregation affirms this longing for the Kingdom of God by reciting the ancient Kaddish prayer. Our most ancient books have various rules for human behaviour. The Torah includes two versions of the Ten Commandments. In Chapter 19 of the Book of Leviticus is the Holiness Code. The Biblical Prophets taught that the worship of God was valueless without ethical behaviour and social justice. Around about the year 200 CE the Mishnah was compiled by Judah the Prince who tried to capture in simple classical Hebrew the religious life of the Jewish people following two disastrous wars against the

Roman Empire. The Mishnah, in turn, gave birth to two Talmuds, one written in the Land of Israel and the other in Babylonia.

Many of the religious practices and melodies of Jewish life that we now know were born in Europe in the Middle Ages. In brief, the central core of Jewish life and practice has always been bound up in the belief of the One God and our place in a law-abiding Universe. The way in which we find our place within the world as Jews has changed and developed through the centuries. To use the helpful imagery of Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan, the creator of the Reconstructionist Movement in the 20th Century, we are part of an evolving Jewish religious civilization.

#### **COMMENTARY**

The mystery of divine creativity is, of course, ultimately unknowable. The Genesis narrative does not seek to make intelligible what is beyond the human ken. To draw upon human language to explain that which is outside any model of human experience is inevitably to confront the inescapable limitations of any attempt to give verbal expression to this subject. For this reason alone, the narrative in its external form must reflect the time and place of its composition. Thus it directs us to take account of the characteristic modes of literary expression current in ancient Israel... The biblical creation narrative is a document of faith. It is a quest for meaning and a statement of a religious position. It enunciates the fundamental postulates of the religion of Israel, the central ideas and concepts that animate the whole of biblical literature. Its quintessential teaching is that the universe is wholly the purposeful product of divine intelligence, that is of the one self-sufficient, self-existing God, who is a transcendent Being outside of nature and who is sovereign over space and time.

Nahum M Sarna: quoted from the Introduction to the first chapter of Genesis.

The Jewish Publication Society,

‘Torah Commentary’—Genesis, 1989

#### **HOW DID PROGRESSIVE JUDAISM BEGIN?**

Progressive Judaism may be said to have begun when Judaism began. Tradition tells us that Abraham, the first Jew, took his family and left his homeland in search of a life free from the worship of pagan gods. Moses, the law giver, turned a community of slaves into a free community with an extraordinary legislative structure. In the context of the ancient world the Biblical innovations are startling. Amos, in the 8th Century BCE, resolutely proclaimed a radical vision of social justice that defied the religious establishment of his time. His words were preserved by those who came after him. The prophet Deutero-Isaiah was the first to proclaim the vision of universal God. Ezra the Scribe edited the ancient traditions of his people. The author of the Book of Job grappled with the problem of evil in a challenging and unconventional way.

In post-biblical times the teacher Hillel did not hesitate to adapt and amend the written law and issued his famous edict or prosbul which changed the way in which the sabbatical year was observed. When the Romans destroyed the great Jerusalem Temple in the year 70, Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai enabled the synagogue to take its place and proclaimed that prayer had taken the place of sacrificial offerings.

Faced with the destructive aftermath of two rebellions against Rome, Judah the Prince dared to commit the Oral Law to writing and compiled the Mishnah. Later, the great medieval philosopher Maimonides codified the Talmud and attempted to reconcile Greek philosophical theory with Jewish tradition.

After centuries of cruel discrimination and relentless persecution, the Jews of many European States were freed by the spirit of the new Age of the Enlightenment. The French Revolution proclaimed 'liberty, equality and fraternity' and, after two years of bitter debate, extended those rights to the Jews. Emancipation from the ghetto was a long and painful process that saw the early defection from Judaism of many Jews. Progressive Judaism was the creative response of an entire community to a modern, emancipated world. Reform, often quite radical, was one of the ways in which Jews attempted to cope with the sociological and historical changes that resulted from political, civil and economic emancipation. It was by no means a mindless reaction to freedom.

The early 19th century reformers concentrated on liturgical change and edited the prayer book. They discarded references to the restoration of the sacrificial cult, the physical resurrection of the dead and the coming of the Messiah. Emphasis was placed on decorum. Choral music, accompanied by an organ, was soon introduced. Sermons given in the everyday language of the people was a much debated innovation. The segregated seating for women was gradually abolished and 'Confirmation' provided a coming of age ceremony for girls and boys. Rabbis began to study at universities and receive secular academic training in addition to their traditional skills. This enabled them to communicate with their congregations in modern and intellectually acceptable modes. European Liberal Judaism soon spread to North America where it became more radical and less traditional. Many of the Jews from central Europe who migrated in the 1850s were political liberals who were eager to cast off the shadows of reactionary Europe. By the late 19th Century the 'Science of Judaism' (Wissenschaft des Judentums) reflected the developing understanding of evolution, history and biblical scholarship. Non-orthodox and non-fundamentalist rabbinical seminaries were founded in both Europe and the United States. National rabbinical associations were formed and changes to religious practice were sanctioned. In reaction, those Jews who refused to change their way of worship came to be called 'orthodox'. Today the Jewish world consists of a kaleidoscope of beliefs, movements and organisations that range from the Ultra-orthodox to the secular. In the English speaking Diaspora the major non-orthodox movements are called Reform, Liberal, Conservative and Reconstructionist. In order to cope with this diversity we often use the inclusive term 'Progressive Judaism'.

#### **COMMENTARY**

I was asked to state whether the teachings of the Talmud permit:

1. To cleanse our liturgy from later additions (Heaven only knows when and by whom they were added!) and to restore it to its pristine simplicity.
2. To say one's prayers in the understandable language of one's country, so that the heart of the worshipper may know what the lips speak.
3. To hold a service to the accompaniment of an organ, so that harmony and order, which are now lacking in our synagogues, might be reintroduced.
4. Or whether such changes are prohibited because of

the rule: 'the customs of Israel have the force of Torah', which therefore may not be altered.

Frankly, I could not at first muster much courage to make a public statement about this...but after mature thought my reason returned. What, I thought, shall truth remain repressed because weak people dislike it? Shall the sun hide its light because the night owl cannot bear it? And so (in Dessau in 1818) I stated it was not only permissible, but obligatory, to free the worship ritual from its adhesions, to hold the Service in language understandable to the worshipper, and to accompany it with music and song.

Rabbi Aaron Chorin in his defence of Reform (in Hebrew) 'D'var b'Itoh—A Word in its Time', 1819

## **HOW DID JUDAISM SURVIVE IN A CHRISTIAN WORLD?**

Jews and Christians (and Moslems) share many common beliefs. We have all inherited that Jewish treasure house of wisdom that we call the Tanakh. Christians and Jews obviously disagree about the status of a Jew called Joshua in Hebrew and Jesus in Greek. We profoundly disagree with many of the theological teachings of the great Christian Apostle Paul (who was born a Jew). The two monotheistic faiths coped with the Roman destruction of Jerusalem and its Temple in differing ways. For Jews prayer and study took the place of sacrifice. For Christians the altar of the Church became the focus of worship. The wine and bread which are the symbols of a Jewish festive or shabbat meal, signifying joy and gratitude, became the body and blood of Jesus to be shared with worshippers. The Church retained the concept of a priesthood and developed the idea of the Trinity which maintained that there were three manifestations of God in One. The new faith created its own book of scripture which they called the New Testament as against the 'Old'. At the same time the Jewish people revered the concept of an Oral Law that was set forth in the Mishnah. By the year 200 CE, the break between the two faiths was complete and by the time the Roman Empire became Christian, a wall of separation and contempt had been built. Sadly, the New Testament had been written at a time of this process of separation and 'the Jews' were blamed for the death of Jesus and the followers of this new faith claimed to have superseded the 'old' religion.

Ironically, according to the New Testament, Jesus had insisted repeatedly that his message was for the Jews alone. There is a very strong tradition that he had been crucified by the Romans for claiming to be 'King of the Jews'. It took one thousand years before the First Crusade brought death and suffering to the Jews. It was not until the 16th century that the Church demanded that Jews not live beside Christians nor dress like Christians. And yet both faiths have influenced each other. We exchanged modes of prayer and melodies for worship. The Jews were often the bridge between east and west. The great Christian scholars Jerome and Aquinas acknowledged their debt to Jewish teachers. Martin Luther believed at first that his reforms would induce Jews to follow him. When they didn't he became violently anti-Jewish. Christianity claimed to be the new Israel and to have superseded Judaism.

The accumulated animosity caused by the disturbing fact that the people of Jesus did not believe that he was the Messiah or the incarnation of God helped to bring about the tragedy of the Shoah. Following the Second World War, most major Churches have confronted this terrible heritage and urged Christians to understand Judaism and Jews in a

new light. Pope John Paul II has called the Jews the Church's 'older brother'. The findings of Jewish scholars in the past century are read with respect and sympathy and Jews no longer hesitate to speak about a Jewish Jesus.

It is therefore sad to find people who are ex-Jews or part-Jews calling themselves 'Jews for Jesus' or 'Christian Jews'. After two thousand years the two faiths have their own theological history and language. No one can be both Jewish and Christian. A Jew must believe in the unity of God. Jews do not believe anyone has ever come back from the dead. We do not believe the Messiah came two thousand years ago and redeemed the world. We do not believe that bread and wine can become anyone's body and blood. Jews do not believe that babies are born with original sin and must be redeemed. The list of differences is long and to claim to be a 'Jew for Jesus' is to treat the historic development of Christianity with contempt and displays an astounding lack of theological sophistication.

Dialogue and understanding between people of differing religious faiths is a positive and challenging experience. Jews have never thought they possess the only path to salvation or redemption. Dialogue with people of other faiths does not make us less Jewish. On the contrary it often requires us to focus on our own heritage and to learn to look at it from new perspectives. There is an old Jewish teaching that it is a mitzvah to extend our limits of behaviour mipne dar'kay shalom 'for the sake of peace'. Helping to create understanding and empathy between human beings can only bring blessing.

#### **COMMENTARY**

There are two counter-tendencies in the Jewish vision of the Messiah. The ecstatic poetry of the prophets tended to suggest that the Messiah would come as the result of cataclysms and cosmic miracles. There are, however, more sober views in the Bible, which identify the Messiah with real political events, like the restoration of the Jews from Babylonian captivity by their deliverer, the Persian King Cyrus. Each of these notions has continued throughout the history of the Jewish faith.

Rabbi Arthur Hertzberg

Some of our sages say Elijah will come before the Messiah. But concerning all of these and similar things, nobody knows how they will be until they happen. For these matters are concealed in the prophetic books. Even the sages have no tradition concerning them, except what they have deduced from the biblical verses, and so their opinion is divided. At any rate, neither the sequence of these events nor their details are the root of religion. A person should not be over-concerned with legendary tales, nor spend undue time on midrashic interpretations about them or with matters like them. One must not make them of primary importance, because they do not lead one either to the love or fear of God. Nor should we try to calculate the Messianic end.

Maimonides, 'Laws Concerning Kings' 11-12

#### **DOES THIS MEAN THAT PROGRESSIVE JEWS DO NOT BELIEVE IN THE MESSIAH ?**

More than two thousand years ago, in an era of oppression and war, Judaism developed the belief in a Messiah (which literally means a person anoint-ed to be king) who would

sit on the throne of a restored Davidic Monarchy and establish the kingdom of God on earth. This redeemer is not mentioned in the Hebrew Bible. However the ecstatic poetry of the prophets and the physical disappearance of the Davidic line, following the Babylonian Exile, undoubtedly produced the belief that the Messiah would come “in the end of days” as the result of cataclysms and cosmic miracles.

The age of great empires presided over by an immensely powerful ruler has gone but the optimistic and hopeful concept of the ultimate redemption of humanity is woven into the fabric of Jewish history.

There is no doubt that the Jewish longing for redemption brought about Zionism which is a form of secular messianic belief. Progressive Judaism affirms the ancient hope for a Messianic Age brought into being through the acceptance of God’s will by all humanity. We no longer believe in the coming of an individual “King Messiah” who will bring about the rule of God. Jews certainly do not attribute divinity to an individual human being. We speak of all human beings as the “children of God” which acknowledges that we are partners of the Holy One in helping to build God’s Kingdom on earth.

It took a long time for Judaism to develop a belief in life after death. We do not believe in the physical resurrection of the dead or in heaven or hell. We see that we live on through our actions and within our family and our community’s spiritual heritage. We are made in the Divine Image. We live on in a Universe in which nothing ever dies. In the face of death the Jew recites Kaddish which magnifies and hallows God’s name and looks to the future with hope. In other words, in the face of death we trust in God’s goodness.

What then is the purpose of life? It is told in the Talmud (B Eruvin 13b) “The disciples of Hillel and Shammai argued for two and a half years about whether it would have been better if humanity had not been created. Finally they agreed. It would have been better had we had not been created but since we have been let us always carefully examine all we have done in the past and all that we are about to do”.

### **ARE THE WAYS IN WHICH PROGRESSIVE JEWS PRAY REALLY KOSHER?**

How can prayer not be acceptable to God ?

There seems to be a universal need to reach out and communicate with a power or force that extends beyond ourselves. One aspect of the human need to communicate is worship. It is the simple act of being aware of a sense of awe in the face of the miracle of life. We are moved to an expression of gratitude and wonder.

Jewish worship is planned, ordered and cyclical. Reading prayers in the vernacular, being able to sing prayers with musical accompaniment, listening to sermons which relate to the contemporary world and caring about decorum do not make a service un-Jewish.

Aristeas, a Jew from Alexandria, reported about a visit he made to Jerusalem in the days of the Second Temple, and was amazed by the reverence shown during the service. He reported: ‘A general silence reigns, so that one might think there was not a single man in the place although the number of ministers in attendance is more than seven hundred’.

Worship in ancient times was an intense experience and the congregations which seem to encourage gossip and noise do Judaism a grave disservice and are certainly not ‘traditional’. A great deal does depend upon the congregation and the rabbi or religious

leader. Modern Jews seem to be very good at writing prayer books and terrible at praying. We are accustomed to going to concerts or plays or films and passively sitting in an audience waiting to be entertained and prayer is not like that. It requires our physical presence together with a familiarity with the language and music of prayer. An eloquent sermon from the pulpit may enhance a service but it does not constitute a service. Only the congregation can do that. In a world in which we are exposed to so much dazzling hype and sexual innuendo we need to be able to spend some time in a community engaged in prayer and study. We need time and a place in which to focus on ideas which are really important.

#### **COMMENTARY**

‘If you have a sapling in your hand and messengers come to tell you that the Messiah has arrived, first plant the sapling and then go out to greet him’.

Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai, first century CE. (Avot d’Rabbi Natan 2.31)

When I was still a child, I sat once at the feet of my grandfather and read a book, and when I came to the place where it is told how the Messiah sits alone by the gates of Rome and waits, I went up to my grandfather and asked him ‘For whom is the Messiah waiting?’ My grandfather looked at me and said ‘For you, my son’.

Hayim Arlosoroff

Reb Naftali, the Rebbe of Ropshitz, was taking an unaccustomed way home when he came across a magnificent estate. He approached the man he saw patrolling the grounds and asked him for whom he worked. The guard mentioned the name of one of the great men of city and said he was employed to protect the estate. He then asked Reb Naftali, ‘And for whom do you work?’ The rabbi was startled and began to try to answer. And then he said, ‘Will you come and work for me?’ The man replied, ‘And what would be my duties?’ Answered the rabbi, ‘To remind me’.

Martin Buber, ‘Tales of the Hasidim’,

Book 2, ‘The Later Masters’

A musician must practice by pre-arranged schedule, regardless of his inclination at the moment. So with the soul. It may not rely on caprice or put its hope in chance. It must work. The person who folds his hands waiting for the spirit to move him—who postpones worship for the right mood and the perfect setting, a forest or mountain peak for example—will do little of the meditating or praying. After all how often does one find oneself on a mountain peak and when we do, who shall say we will be in a mood to pray?

Milton Steinberg, ‘Basic Judaism’

#### **WHAT IS THE STATUS OF WOMEN WITHIN PROGRESSIVE JUDAISM?**

Progressive Judaism affirms the principle of the equality of men and women in all aspects of ceremonial and communal life. Jewish tradition teaches that women, along with men, are created in God’s image and are equal partners in the Divine Covenant. This idea has not always been exemplified, however, in daily life.

In ancient times, women were frequently seen as possessions rather than autonomous human beings with their own rights and responsibilities. Many biblical laws concerning women involved their protection as one would protect property. For example, the tenth commandment says one should not covet a man's wife, nor any of his other possessions. There is however another significant strand in Biblical tradition. Moses would not have survived without the intervention of his sister Miriam. When Zelophehad dies leaving no male heir, his daughters' right of inheritance is affirmed by Moses (Numbers 27: 1-11). Deborah, Miriam, Yael and Ruth are described as role models of strength and courage.

The status of women changed through the course of Jewish history and over time women were accorded important rights and protective procedures. By the rabbinic period it was no longer possible to take a woman as a wife against her will. The Mishnah provided a number of specific circumstances in which a woman could divorce her husband. Two thousand years ago the text of a marriage document emerged which provided financial support in the event of a divorce. We know that in the Jerusalem Temple the women's court, which overlooked the central courts, was also used by the priests to observe and to learn the correct procedures. There is no evidence whatsoever to suggest that women were segregated in the synagogues of 2000 years ago.

The Talmud ruled that females were exempt from those positive commandments in the Torah that are subject to the dictates of time. The Talmud assumed that domestic duties and the menstrual cycle did not leave women free to observe the mitzvot which men had to perform. Women were the property of their husbands and were 'acquired' by their husband at the time of their marriage. Women were therefore unable to act as witnesses or as free agents in any legal transaction. A female, in this scheme of things, was subject to the directions and control of her father as a child and then of her husband when she married. Laws prohibited women from teaching or speaking in public or raising their voices in prayer or song in case less educated men would be put to shame by their actions.

One thousand years ago monogamy for European Jewish communities was instituted by Rabbenu Gershom ben Judah of Mayence (b. ca. 960-d. 1040). Rabbenu Gershom also decreed that a woman could not be divorced against her will and permitted those Jews who had been forcibly baptised to return to Judaism.

The religious equality of men and women was one of the pioneering concepts of early Jewish religious reform. Progressive Judaism instituted Confirmation for girls as a variant of the boys' Bar Mitzvah more than 150 years ago. However it was not until the mid-20th century that women began to be called to the Torah. It is now customary for girls to become Bat Mitzvah in progressive synagogues at the age of thirteen with exactly the same educational and religious requirements as boys. Progressive prayer books dropped the traditional morning blessing in which men thank the Almighty for not having made them a woman. There was never a firm ruling in Jewish law precluding women from being counted as part of the congregation or from reciting kaddish at the graveside of a child or parent or indeed forbidding the wearing of a tallit. These were matters of custom which became irrelevant as women began to take an equal role in society. Progressive families celebrate the birth of baby girls with an appropriate and timely covenantal ceremony at home or in the synagogue. Women can, and should, be counted in the minyan required for public prayer and be able to conduct a service of worship.

The debate is far from over. Progressive Judaism is in the forefront of exploring issues of concern to women within the religious community. Until very recently the study of Jewish history ignored the role of women. The unique needs of women within the life cycle and the use of gender inclusive language in worship are critical issues for progressive Jews, who actively seek to include every member of the Jewish community. It is appropriate to recall Rabbi Regina Jonas who was the first woman in modern times to become a rabbi. Her ordination took place in Germany in 1935. She worked in Berlin as a rabbi until 1942 when she was deported to Theresienstadt Concentration Camp where she worked tirelessly as a rabbi among the prisoners. She was murdered in Auschwitz in 1944.

By the end of the 1960s the non-orthodox rabbinical seminaries in Europe and North America began to ordain women who had completed the normal academic requirements leading to graduation. After all, the title 'rabbi' means 'master' or 'teacher'. We believe that there will come a time when orthodox seminaries will also ordain women as teachers of Judaism. Temple Beth Israel in Melbourne, the first progressive synagogue in our region, was founded by Mrs Ada Phillips in 1929. Her daughter, Dr Isabelle Phillips, successfully taught herself Hebrew in order to be able to conduct the first classes for the children of the congregation. Throughout the regions of the World Union for Progressive Judaism there are many women who are the builders and leaders of our Movement.

### **DOES PROGRESSIVE JUDAISM WELCOME CONVERSION TO JUDAISM ?**

Authentic religious identity is a matter of self-definition.

Judaism does not offer an exclusive path to salvation. We do not believe that other human beings are in any way damaged or lacking because they are not Jewish. We do however feel that we are partners in an extraordinary spiritual adventure that makes sense of life. Judaism is also grounded in a complex religious civilisation. It is not 'just' a religion. Being Jewish is being part of an extended family. The best Hebrew word for this is *mishpakhah* (family). We speak of our membership in the Jewish People as a reflection of a shared covenantal sense of community.

Conversion to Judaism is not a new phenomenon. Abraham took his extended family with him on his journey to the Promised Land and the Torah tells us that a 'mixed multitude' left Egypt with the freed slaves. The Bible speaks constantly about caring for the stranger and making them feel part of the community. Two thousand years ago Judaism had become a powerful force within the ancient world and many people either became Jews or described themselves as 'God fearers'.

Living alongside Christianity and Islam—two related religious faith communities that had a strong emphasis on missionary activity—made an easy-going attitude to conversion to Judaism hazardous. Conversion to Judaism was seen as a rejection of the true faith and became punishable by death. It is only in recent times that Judaism has been an option for people in search of a religious tradition that has a distinctive pattern of belief and practice.

Conversion to Judaism requires commitment and learning. It is more a matter of discovery and study rather than a blinding moment of revelation. Very often the conversion process begins because an individual marries a Jew and wants to bring up the

children of the marriage as Jews. A person becoming Jewish not only joins a particular family but also gains a community. The process of becoming Jewish will not succeed if the candidate cannot feel at home within the wider Jewish world and finds a place within it. A modern rabbi has observed, 'The truth is that, though today it is easier than ever to be a Jew, it is also easier than ever to cease to be a Jew'. Someone who wants to be Jewish must also consider very seriously whether the Jewish People will be strengthened or diminished by their conversion.

Belonging to a Jewish family is not the only motive for wanting to become Jewish. Judaism can be seen as a spiritual home for its own sake and can make sense intellectually and emotionally. This path to Judaism may be a long one. The congregation will want to know that they can trust the newcomer to uphold the dignity and good name of the Jewish People. It is a solemn and awe-inspiring decision and can be lonely because so many Jewish observances really begin and end in the home. All this is a matter for discussion with a rabbi who is charged with the responsibility of maintaining and strengthening the Jewish People. Care will be taken that by converting to Judaism the applicant will not be harming his or her own family relationships. A convert to Judaism becomes a full Jew. There is no role in Jewish life closed to the convert. It is as though he, or she, stood at the foot of Mt Sinai and said with the people, 'We shall do and we shall hear'. (Exodus 24:7)

#### **COMMENTARY**

Rabbi Hayim of Tsanz used to tell this parable. A man wandering lost in the forest for several days, finally encountered another. He called out: 'Brother, show me the way out of this forest!' The man replied: 'Brother, I too am lost. I can only tell you this: The ways I have tried lead nowhere; they have only led me astray. Take my hand and let us search for the way together.' And Rabbi Chayim would add: 'So it is with us. When we go our separate ways, we may go astray; let us join hands and look for the way together.'

'The Gates of Prayer' (Buber—Tales of the Hasidim)

#### **WHAT DOES PROGRESSIVE JUDAISM HAVE TO SAY ABOUT HUMAN SEXUALITY**

There has been a wide ranging debate in the United States within the progressive Rabbinate about a number of controversial issues concerning sex and sexuality. In the first place we recall that in the story of creation there is the comment, 'When God created humanity, God made Adam in the Divine image...male and female...and God found it very good' (Genesis 1: 27 & 31). From this we understand that our humanity and our diversity, including our sexuality, are derived from the conscious Divine act of creation and are therefore purposeful, pleasurable and positive.

One of the stories of Genesis tells us that Eve was shaped from Adam's rib which, in turn, gave rise to the old Jewish tradition that when a man marries a woman both he and she become complete. It follows that if we are made in the Divine image we have an obligation to value ourselves and our sexual partners and to be sensitive to his/her needs. Authentic and ethical human relationships need to be based upon truth and honesty. Both partners in an intimate and loving relationship need to communicate lovingly and neither partner should use the other as a sexual object. As the centuries have passed the family

has become the cornerstone of Jewish life. Again we recall that the first commandment in the Torah is “be fruitful and multiply” and bringing children into the world and nurturing them is seen as a primary Mitzvah and a source of great joy. The Hebrew word for marriage is Kiddushin which is a variation of the Hebrew noun kadosh meaning ‘holy’. A relationship attains a measure of holiness when both partners set themselves apart exclusively for each other and find a unique emotional, sexual and spiritual intimacy. For this reason the celebration of a marriage is to be seen as a public commitment to the highest ideals of Jewish tradition.

There are many people who, for all sorts of reasons, will never marry. There are some who are homosexual and who may strive to establish stable loving relationships with someone of the same sex. Does this mean that only married heterosexual human beings are to be considered as having been made in the image of the Divine? Of course not. Does this mean that gay or lesbian Jews are disqualified from active involvement in congregational life? Again, the answer is obvious. A congregation is an extended human family that must be a supportive and sympathetic home for every human being.

#### **COMMENTARY**

‘My mother told my aunt this one, looking meaningfully at me. Some old Jewish women were making conversation. ‘Oy Veh’ said one. ‘Mmm...’ moaned another. ‘Oh God!’ wailed the third. ‘Help!’ cried her friend. ‘Well’, said the first briskly, ‘that’s enough about the kids. What about a biscuit and a cosy cup of tea?’

That’s the spirit!’

Rabbi Lionel Blue (with J Magonet), ‘How to Get Up When Life Gets You Down’, Fount, 1992

#### **HOW CAN WE BE JEWS, AND TEACH OUR CHILDREN TO BE JEWS, AFTER ALL THAT HAS HAPPENED TO THE JEWISH PEOPLE IN RECENT TIMES?**

In the middle of the 20th Century more than a million Jewish children were brutally murdered by the Nazis and their allies. One third of our people was lost. Today the Jews in the lands of freedom face loss of Jewish children through assimilation and lack of Jewish education. We cannot afford to lose any more Jews. In both Australia and New Zealand hundreds of thousands of our non-Jewish fellow citizens are descended from a Jewish parent or grandparent who have married ‘out’. The Nazis used viciously bigoted methods of discrimination against European Jewry that everyone mistakenly imagined had been long forgotten. The Jewish badge, the ghettos, exclusion from society, the burning of Jewish books and the burning of men, women and children were all characteristics of Medieval Europe. There is no doubt that the events of modern history have deeply scarred Jewish religious belief. Wounded by the events of the Twentieth Century some survivors of the Shoah, their children and even their grandchildren go out of their way to deny their heritage and to hide it. But most survivors responded to Hitler by rebuilding their lives and contributing to the life of the Jewish people. The State of Israel has no tomb for an unknown soldier. Instead its focus for national mourning and identity is Yad Vashem the Holocaust Museum in Jerusalem.

As the modern Jewish philosopher Emil L Fackenheim has pointed out, ‘At Auschwitz Jews were murdered not because they had disobeyed the God of history, but rather because their grandparents had obeyed Him’. Fackenheim’s answer to this deep and terrible fact is challenging. ‘A Jew may not respond to Hitler’s attempt to destroy Judaism by co-operating in its destruction. In ancient times the unthinkable Jewish sin was idolatry. Today, it is to respond to Hitler by doing his work. Jews are commanded to survive as Jews, lest the Jewish people perish.’ Progressive Jews have incorporated readings and prayers in both their Shabbat and High Holyday prayer books that recall the Shoah but it is too early to make theological sense of all that transpired. Finally it must be said Jews can never again take their physical safety for granted. When dictators and fanatics threaten us and disseminate anti-Jewish literature we should take them seriously. Anti-Semitism is a deep wound upon the human psyche and is still used as a weapon against Israel by her enemies. It is sobering to recall that since the Second World War the United Nations has passed more resolutions denouncing the State of Israel and the return of Jewish sovereignty to Jerusalem than on any other international issue.

#### **COMMENTARY**

Nisht di meysim loyben Got—‘The Dead praise not the Lord’ (Psalm 115).

We received the Torah at Sinai

And in Lublin we gave it back.

The dead praise not the Lord,

The Torah was given for living.

And so together as all of us stood together

At the Giving of the Torah.

So verily, we all died in Lublin.

Jacob Glatstein

‘Somewhere’, said Rebbe Nahman of Bratzlav, ‘there lives a man who asks a question to which there is no answer. A generation later, in another place, there lives a man who asks another question to which there is no answer either—and he doesn’t know, he cannot know, that his question is actually as answer to the first.’ To us, however, questions remain questions. Our existence in the Diaspora is a mystery, as is the emergence of Israel. How did we survive—and why is our survival constantly threatened? To me, the essence of Jewish history, is mystical and not rational.

Elie Wiesel, ‘A Jew Today’,

Random House, 1978

#### **WHAT MAKES A PROGRESSIVE JEWISH PRAYER BOOK DIFFERENT?**

The Hebrew word for prayer book, siddur, comes from the word Seder or ‘order’. The Jewish liturgy, or order of prayers and the way in which a service is conducted, stretches back into biblical days. Many of those chosen psalms and sections of biblical text remain in the Jewish service.

In the days of the Jerusalem Temple, prayers were chanted while the Kohanim (hereditary priesthood) were performing the sacrificial liturgy. About 2000 years ago those prayers became the framework for services of worship in synagogues or ‘meeting places’. The Temple was destroyed by the Romans in the year 70 CE and prayer replaced sacrifice. The institution of the hereditary priesthood ended. The focus of the synagogue service became the reading desk, the scroll, the reader of the service, the pulpit and the siddur—the order of the prayers. Over the centuries, the text of prayers themselves became fixed although there were many differing regional traditions.

The invention of printing made a great difference to Jewish worship because it placed the siddur into the hands of the ordinary worshipper and helped to standardise the liturgy. Through the prayer book Jews were able to express their daily hopes and longings, their communal words of prayer and to find personal consolation. The siddur is one of Judaism’s most important literary creations. But the siddur is more than literature. It must speak directly to the heart and to the conscience of the individual in every generation.

The first German Liberal siddur was published in 1819. It reflected modern concepts and made some significant changes in the traditional text. During the 19th century, with the spread of universal literacy and higher education, many new editions of the prayer book were produced around the world. These prayer books tried to allow the worshipper to pray with no contradiction between heart and mind. Changes to the text of the prayers included the removal of passages concerning the restoration of the Temple and worship involving animal sacrifices, references to a literal belief in the physical resurrection of the dead and the arrival of a personal Messiah.

Liturgical change has continued to develop. The prayer books of Progressive Judaism were the first to reflect the miracle of the rebirth of the State of Israel and the horror of the Shoah. Modern Hebrew songs, prayers and poetry have become part of the ways we worship God. Undoubtedly the process of development will continue amplified by new translations, rituals and thematic readings which reflect active engagement with contemporary life. It is only through change that traditions can remain fresh and meaningful.

## **WHAT IS DIFFERENT ABOUT THE PROGRESSIVE JEWISH APPROACH TO HALAKHAH AND RELIGIOUS OBSERVANCE?**

Imagine that you are Jew with no background or upbringing in Jewish practice. You would like to learn more about how to welcome Shabbat with the lighting of the Sabbath candles. Where would you begin? You could speak to a rabbi. You could attend a course on an introduction to Judaism. There are many good books about Jewish customs. From all these sources you would learn how to light the shabbat candles, how many candles are required, what blessings you would say and when to kindle the lights. But where does all this information come from? It is distilled from halakhah, the body of Jewish law which has grown over the centuries out of practical encounters between Torah and daily life. Virtually all our ritual ‘how to’ questions are the product of the halakhic process.

Halakhah is a technical Aramaic word for law which occurs in Rabbinic literature. In Hebrew the word recalls the verb ‘to walk’. Following the destruction of Herod’s Temple in the year 70 CE, the rabbinical academies and law courts in Israel began to build a

framework of observance that would replace the priesthood, the sacrificial cult and an independent Jewish political existence based in Jerusalem.

This 'second Torah'—or Oral Torah, was first-edited and written down in a large six volume collection called the Mishnah. The Rabbinic debates about the Mishnah, which took place over the following centuries in both Israel and Babylon, are contained in the Talmud. This vast Rabbinic collection of law, legend, history, case-study and debate laid the basis for subsequent Jewish religious practice. Rabbinic literature demonstrates a pluralistic and dynamic world. It clearly reflects differing opinions and mirrors the environment and intellectual world of its time.

It is orthodox belief that the Torah, its fundamental laws, details and interpretations were all given through Moses on Mt. Sinai. This 'fundamentalist' position rejects the concept of change or the possibility of development or innovation in halakhah. Yet there are many examples of evolutionary change. The Babylonian Talmud tells the famous story of a rabbinical argument about a technical point of law. One rabbi successfully appeals to God for support and a heavenly voice is heard from on high. His rabbinical opponent overrules the miraculous intervention by reminding God that the ultimate decision must lie in the logic of the argument because the Torah was given to human beings. Progressive Jews maintain that Jewish law was never monolithic. The right to dissent 'for the sake of heaven' was respected. The texts carefully record differing interpretations of the halakhah.

Judaism seeks ethical as well as ritual values in the halakhah. There are traditional values enshrined in the halakhah which rely on biblical law as the basis for personal and communal decisions. There is ample precedence in rabbinic literature for carefully considered change. For example, biblical law decrees the death penalty for a whole series of offences. In post-biblical times rabbinic law hedged these penalties with so many conditions that capital punishment became a thing of the past.

There are biblical laws concerning sexual offences, ritual purity, the sabbatical year and the religious calendar that the rabbis of the Mishnah and the Talmud changed, or at least developed, almost beyond recognition as conditions of life changed. There is still the need to amend, to change or even to abolish the practice of ancient laws in order to preserve the basic ethical impulse that is the foundation of the monotheistic faith begun by Abraham and Sarah.

Progressive Jews understand that there is a hierarchy of value within tradition. Early forms of worship and social behaviour have been changed by the same religious civilisation that produced them. We have learned that poverty, hunger, war and discrimination diminish the dignity of all those created in the image of God. From its earliest law codes, Judaism has been driven by a concern for social justice, the enhancement of life and the ideal of personal integrity and honesty.

#### **COMMENTARY**

You shall not be afraid of your hidden impulses. You shall learn to respect yourself and then you will love your neighbour as yourself. You shall transcend inner anxiety, recognizing your true competence and courage. You shall stand undismayed in the presence of grief. You shall not deny the sadness of your heart. You shall make no detour

around sorrow, but shall live through it, and by the aid of human sympathy and friendship you shall win dominion over sorrow. You shall eternally respect truth and tell it with kindness. You shall search your heart for the traces of immaturity and the temptations of childishness. You shall reject all flight from freedom, all escape from maturity, as unworthy of your own person. With that sense of freedom you shall commune with God, the source of truth, the giver of peace.

Rabbi Joshua Loth Liebman, 'Peace of Mind',

W Heinemann, 1946

## **DO PROGRESSIVE JEWS ACCEPT THE LAWS OF THE TALMUD & THE SHULH.AN ARUH.?**

The Talmud is the account of the most erudite discussions that took place in Jewish Rabbinic academies in Israel and Babylon in the third to the fifth centuries of the modern era.

The six volume Mishnah, compiled at the end of the 2nd Century CE, was an attempt to set down in writing the way in which Jewish Law had developed following the destruction of the Temple. There are, in fact, two Talmuds. The major text was written in Babylonia and the other in Eretz Yisrael and both are based upon the Mishnah. If Judaism had developed in a monolithic authoritarian manner the Talmud would never have been written. They constituted the ancient parliamentary reports of an ongoing debate about an autonomous system of religious and civil law which continued for centuries. The Talmud is part of a vast chronicle of a people who had lost their land and their Temple and was written between the Second to the Fifth centuries. It was a liberating effort undertaken by the leading rabbis of that era, and Progressive Judaism would consider it to be of human and not divine authority. It represents the further development of progressive revelation in a new age. Many of the customs and rituals that all Jews adhere to today find their origin in the Talmud. Some of the ancient attitudes towards the status and social role of women, of sexual ethics and theories about health are of very little relevance today.

There is a process that records the development of Jewish Law. It is contained in a vast literature of Rabbinic Responsa in which experts in science, ethics and rabbinical law attempt to suggest how Jews should behave today. Year by year, volumes of Responsa, both orthodox and progressive, are published and read by both rabbis and lay people.

Indeed, many believe that what is required today is that we follow the daring example of Babylonian Jewry by continuing to develop Jewish traditions that will combine the spirit of our tradition with the needs of our century.

The Shulh.an Aruh. ('The Set Table') was published just 400 years ago by Joseph Caro. Its four sections were written to acquaint students and less educated adults with basic Jewish laws and principles. It is a summary of the norms of Jewish life as developed in the vast Talmudic literature. Earlier attempts to codify Jewish laws were made by Maimonides and many others.

The Shulh.an Aruh. became the authoritative religious code for Jews. Although it reflected primarily the ritual customs of Sephardic Jews, it was later annotated by leading Ashkenazi (Polish and German) rabbis. Thus it truly reflected the religious practices of

all Jews. It has remained to this day ‘The Code’ among the orthodox Jewish communities.

To the progressive Jew the Shulh.an Aruh. remains what it was originally meant to be, namely, a summary of the religious observances practised by Jews around the time of its publication in the 16th century. The Shulh.an Aruh. therefore serves as a rich and fascinating resource but it cannot be a definitive and authoritative guide for our 21st century community.

#### **COMMENTARY**

‘We bring Torah into the world when we strive to fulfil the highest ethical mandates in our relationship with others and with all of God’s creation. Partners with God in tikkun olam—repairing the world— we are called to help bring nearer the Messianic age... We are obligated to pursue justice and righteousness, and to narrow the gap between the affluent and the poor, to act against discrimination and oppression, to pursue peace, to welcome the stranger, to protect the earth’s bio-diversity and natural resources and to redeem those in physical, economic and spiritual bondage. We affirm the Mitzvah of Tzedakah—setting aside time and money to translate the words of the Torah into the work of our hands’.

From ‘A Declaration of Principles’ accepted by the Central Conference of American Rabbis, 1999

#### **THE UNITY OF GOD IS SUCH AN ABSTRACT IDEA. HOW DOES IT MAKE A DIFFERENCE TO THE WAY WE LIVE?**

The Hebrew Bible takes God’s presence for granted. There is, of course, in the Shema, (Deut.6:4) the declaration that God is One. The Ten Commandments begin with the reminder that God brought the slaves out of Egypt.

In the Torah, Moses asks to see God. His request is denied. He has met the Divine in the desert in the presence of a bush that burned and was not consumed. At this time he learns that God’s name is the verb ‘to be’—in past, present and future tense. Not content with this revelation he is commanded to shelter in the cleft of the rock and he is told that God is gracious, long suffering, patient and merciful. In the First Book of Kings (19:11) Elijah hides in a desert cave and confronts God. There is a great wind but we are told God is not in the wind. There is an earthquake and a fire and God is in neither. Then Elijah hears a soft murmuring voice and, recognising the experience of the Divine, walks to the mouth of the cave to face the world as it is. The Hebrew biblical tradition resists the temptation to present God in any shape or form. We are taught to find God within the moral and spiritual values that are built into life itself. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel has written, ‘Religion consists of God’s question and humanity’s answer’.

The voice that Elijah heard is never silent. In a world that appears to be uncaring and devoid of value, the Jew affirms that there is a transcendent, commanding voice. The Genesis story says that creation was ‘good’—even ‘very good’ but not ‘perfect’. Human beings must be partners with the Creator in making the world a better place. We affirm the presence of God by choosing to act in ways that are moral and ethical.

The ways in which Jews have spoken about God have changed throughout the centuries. There is simply no separate progressive or orthodox theology. God is understood as infinite. Human beings are finite. It follows, therefore, that however we try to describe God, we shall always fail. There is a universal sense of awe and wonder which human beings recognise as a significant response to life. Judaism speaks of a God of history and a covenant between the Jewish people and God. Jews find religious inspiration in the concept of the moral and ethical imperative.

Science, physics and astro-physics have begun to reveal a deep and complex order within the universe. The emergence of conscious, thoughtful beings is seen to be of profound significance. Science can only take us so far but it presumes that we live within an ordered, law-abiding, infinitely complex universe in which, paradoxically, even chaos obeys certain rules. Progressive Judaism understands both science and philosophy as helping to shape beliefs and religious concepts.

Many Jews understand God to be the One supernatural Being whose presence is known through divine revelation and is affirmed through prayer. Other Jews understand the nature of God to be revealed within human life as the power that makes for salvation. There are spiritual values which actually sustain life and that can be seen as manifestations of the Divine—values like love, justice, freedom, purpose, conscience, law, education, cooperation and renewal. These values are celebrated during the Jewish religious year.

#### **COMMENTARY**

Prayer cannot bring water to parched fields, nor mend a broken bridge, nor rebuild a ruined city; but prayer can water an arid soul, mend a broken heart and rebuild a weakened will.

‘The Gates of Prayer’

The history of this people is also a history of boundaries, of eras that divided it deeply, of domains and areas that created manners, of spheres of history within the one history. At times there existed tensions between the parts, but the parts never broke apart. In the end the tension had the strength to create strength. The unity always endured.

Rabbi Leo Baeck, ‘This People Israel, The Meaning of Jewish Existence’ p 392

#### **HOW MUCH RELIGIOUS FREEDOM DO PEOPLE POSSESS?**

People generally make religious decisions on three levels: individual, communal and organisational. In the individual realm every person is obliged to decide the question of religious observance, though it must be remembered that very often an individual decision will involve a whole household. This matter of personal choice must be the product of knowledge and learning that comes from a sense of identification with the people of Israel and a sense of responsibility for our destiny.

In recent times Rabbi Jakob J Petuch-owski wrote, ‘Everything which contributes to the survival and to the unity of the Covenant Community of Israel must be regarded as a religious commandment. Everything, on the other hand, which hurts the covenant must be avoided. Bearing this in mind, the Reform Jew will observe many a Mitzvah toward which he might feel no personal obligation’. It follows, therefore, that in matters of

marriage and personal status, Israel and the Diaspora, we must be careful not to hurt our relationship to K'lal Yisrael—our sense of being part of the community of Israel. It must be admitted that sometimes this may be an impossible task as the People of Israel include both the ultra-orthodox and the totally secular. No Jew is alone. A sense of history, tradition and covenantal responsibility must shape our attitudes. It is important to have a rabbi or teacher to share the experience of studying Torah. Progressive Judaism would say that it is very difficult to be a part of the Jewish community without belonging to a synagogue. The festivals and Shabbat belong at home and also within the religious community. There are two sides, the personal and the communal, to almost every Jewish religious observance. It would be sad to choose to go without food and to abstain from work on Yom Kippur and not to be with other Jews as they hear and read the great prayers and melodies of one of the world's most beautiful religious days. To celebrate a Seder on Passover Eve and then to miss the singing of the Hallel psalms in synagogue on the next morning is to lose a potentially transcendent celebration of our tradition.

Minhag is the Hebrew word for custom and customs vary throughout the Jewish world. In some synagogues congregations always stand up when the Shema is said. Other congregations remain seated. In some synagogues everyone joins in saying kaddish. In others only the mourners will recite the kaddish. Just as there is no compulsion obliging all congregants to observe exactly the same rules, so there are differences, and even disagreements, between Jews in different parts of the world.

In general, progressive Jews in Israel, Europe, South Africa, Australia and New Zealand are more traditional than their counterparts in North America. The mitzvot that guide and instruct the life of each individual remind us that God is present in the world. Expressing gratitude for the food we eat or setting aside a day to celebrate the beauty of creation are not mere ritual acts. The need to treat each human being with dignity and respect is not simply a result of secular and humanistic values. These and the other mitzvot incumbent upon the individual serve to heighten our awareness of God's presence. Progressive Judaism takes seriously the concept of tikkun olam—the task of repairing the world or helping to bring about the sovereignty of God in the world. We believe that Judaism teaches us that we are partners with God in the creation of the world and that we cannot turn aside when injustice, racism or degradation of life threaten the world in which we live. Rabbi Leo Baeck has written about 'the miracle of the thinking human being'. According to Baeck in his book, 'This People Israel', begun during his imprisonment in a concentration camp, the moral power is 'the great contradiction of everything which earthly existence indicates'. The greatest miracle is the power to recognise one's true self in deeds of selflessness.

#### **COMMENTARY**

'And God saw everything that had been made and found it very good'. And God said: 'This a beautiful world that I have given you. Take good care of it, do not ruin it.' It is said: 'Before the world was created, the Holy One kept creating worlds and destroying them. Finally God created this world and was satisfied. God said to Adam: 'This is the last world I shall make. I place it in your hands. Hold it in trust.'

The Midrash, quoted in 'Gates of Prayer'

Mitzvot are not identical with rituals, sancta, or minhagim (customs). All these things may have value and a place in our Jewish lives. But a custom, even a time-honoured and history-sanctioned custom, is not a mitzvah. This is a matter of some importance because we live in an era of re-ritualisation. At this moment many Jews and non-Jews share a deep craving for meaningful ritual that connects them with one another, that marks the passage of their lives and that evokes a sense of wonder about human existence... if the authority behind a mitzvah lies primarily in history and not in God, is it a mitzvah? A mitzvah is a Jewish affirmation, in which there is a human element to be sure, but its uniqueness flows from the fact that in carrying out the action we feel a touch of Shechinah (Divine Presence), and it thus evokes in us religious wonder.

Rabbi Eric H Yoffie from 'A Reform View of Mitzvot' in 'Duties of the Soul—the Role of Commandments' in 'Liberal Judaism', UAHC Press, NY, 1999

### **WHAT DOES A PROGRESSIVE RABBI STUDY AND DO?**

There are five major training institutions for progressive rabbis. The oldest surviving seminary is the Hebrew Union College—Jewish Institute of Religion that began in Cincinnati in America's Mid-West in 1875. The College also has institutes of learning in New York, Los Angeles and Jerusalem. There is a College in Philadelphia for the training of rabbis for the Reconstructionist Movement. In New York and Jerusalem the Conservative Movement has the Jewish Theological Seminary. In London, the Leo Baeck College was founded after World War II in an attempt to replace the European institutions destroyed in the Holocaust. A shared program in Jerusalem between the Hebrew Union College and the Hebrew University enables Israeli students to prepare academically and spiritually for ordination.

Students are expected to have completed an undergraduate course of study at a secular university and must pass a rigorous admission procedure before beginning their Rabbinic studies. Only in exceptional cases is the course that follows less than five years. The program concludes with a Rabbinic thesis of scholarly value and the earning of a Master's Degree and ordination.

Knowledge of Bible, Mishnah, Talmud and legal codes is basic to all Rabbinic students whether they are orthodox or progressive. Progressive rabbis must also study a wider curriculum that includes psychology, counselling, educational theory and practice, Jewish history, philosophy, theology, modern Hebrew and congregational management. The traditional texts are taught critically and there is room for students to choose particular scholarly interests.

The orthodox rabbi must be a master of the traditional texts because he is being trained to function as a judge and teacher within an almost immutable tradition. The progressive rabbi must be able to function as a Jewish resource person, community leader and teacher in a modern Jewish community where many congregants are tertiary graduates. It almost goes without saying that progressive rabbinical seminaries are open to male and female students.

The rabbi operates within a framework of communal dialogue and partnership working alongside members of the congregation to strengthen Jewish life. The modern congregational rabbi is employed by contract or agreement to work with a congregation

to help conduct religious services, to officiate at the ‘great moments’ in the lives of the families of the congregation and to be the congregation’s teacher. Often the progressive rabbi will be the ‘ambassador’ or spokesperson of the Jewish community. Progressive congregations are committed to the principle of a free pulpit and the progressive rabbi is able to speak honestly.

The relationship between rabbi and congregation is delicate and sensitive. Sometimes this relationship will last a lifetime. Sometimes the relationship will be for a predetermined term of service. A rabbi is not a priest; and yet within a congregational setting, he or she must serve as a pastor. The progressive rabbi is expected to serve as a member of the congregation’s Board of Management and helps determine congregational policy.

#### **COMMENTARY**

The disciples of the Ba’al Shem Tov—the Master of the Good Name—heard that a certain man had a great reputation for learning. Some of them wanted to go to him and find out what he had to teach. The great master gave them permission to go, but first they asked him, ‘And how shall we be able to tell whether he is a true tzaddik (a righteous man)?’ The Ba’al Shem Tov replied, ‘Ask him to advise you what to do to keep unholy thoughts from disturbing you in your prayers and studies. If he gives you advice, then you will know that he belongs to those who are of no account. For this is the destiny of every human being in the world to the very hour of death; to struggle time after time with the extraneous, and time after time to uplift and fit it into the nature of the Divine.’

Martin Buber: ‘The Tales of the Hasidim—The Early Masters—Book One’, Schocken Press, 1961

A congregation is a *kehilla kedosha*, a holy congregation. Belonging is not only a matter of survival, but a question of spiritual integration, of holiness. The Jew who wishes to be part of the Jewish community identifies with the quest for spiritual integration or holiness. It is the experience of Judaism that God cannot be found on a remote island but is revealed in the midst of the people; Scripture insists that the whole Israelite community was present at Sinai. God is not an a priori category, a philosophical abstraction with which one has to start one’s religious quest. Instead God is to be sought in the company of like-minded seekers. To belong to a community does not mean that you start with certainties, but that you have a desire to look for them.

Rabbi Dow Marmur: ‘On Being a Jew –a Reform Perspective’, Holy Blossom Temple, Toronto, 1994

#### **HOW DO PROGRESSIVE JEWS KEEP THE SHABBAT?**

Progressive Judaism emphasises the positive character of Shabbat so that the seventh day can be an experience of renewal—a day of holiness and spiritual refreshment. It is our chance to escape from the daily humdrum world and make Shabbat special. There are three principles:

1. To sanctify Shabbat. We sanctify Shabbat at home and in synagogue. The Friday night home celebration includes candles and the Kiddush, prayers and song. The Torah portion of the week and the communal prayers of the synagogue sanctify the special day.

2. To honour Shabbat. Shabbat should not be treated as a ‘secular’ day. Even one’s clothing should reflect the feeling that this is sacred time. Many people assign time for activities that are different from their regular weekday work.

3. To enjoy Shabbat. Tradition speaks of three special meals of Shabbat. In ancient times three meals in one day may well have been out of the ordinary but there are special foods associated with most of the festivals and certainly with Shabbat. Shabbat may well be the perfect time to visit family and friends.

Shabbat is an essential part of Jewish observance. Not only is it the only festival mentioned in the Ten Commandments, but also it has been part of Jewish communal life for generations. It is a precious opportunity to separate ourselves from the commercial and technological complexities of modern life.

In other words, the progressive Jew is commanded to join in Shabbat services, to celebrate Shabbat at home around the dinner table, to meet friends, to hear the Torah read and discussed, to read, to be in touch with nature and to farewell Shabbat with the beautiful ceremony of Havdalah.

As the modern Hebrew author Ahad Ha’am wrote: ‘More than Israel has kept the Sabbath, the Sabbath has kept Israel’.

## **HOW DO PROGRESSIVE JEWS REGARD THE FESTIVALS OF THE JEWISH YEAR?**

The Jewish calendar weaves a pattern of belief and idealism that links the individual to God’s presence in the universe. The concept of the one God, indivisible, transcendent and immanent, is transmitted to the Jew, young and old, through the heritage of the Jewish year.

Shabbat reminds us week by week of the mitzvot of rest and joy, study and worship. The Yamim Noraim (the Days of Awe or High Holydays) bring the community together for repentance (Teshuvah) and spiritual renewal. We have a direct personal relationship with God that can be restored through sincere repentance.

We celebrate the three ancient “Pilgrimage Festivals” of Pesah., Shavuot and Sukkot—which concludes with Simh.at Torah. Pesah. or Passover speaks to us of the spiritual relevance of freedom. Shavuot (Weeks) is the festival of revelation and Torah. Sukkot (Booths) is a celebration of thanksgiving for life and its harvest which is followed by the festival of Simh.at Torah (Rejoicing of the Torah). All the pilgrimage festivals were originally intimately linked with the seasons of the year and the conservation of nature. The festivals brought pilgrims to the Temple in Jerusalem which, for one thousand years, was the only sanctuary in the world at which one universal God was worshipped. The Jewish year has come to include other special days such as H.anukah, Purim, Yom Ha’atzmaut (Israel’s Independence Day), Yom HaShoah (Holocaust Memorial Day) and Tish’a B’Av (the Ninth of Av).

Through prayer and worship the individual and the community continue to experience God’s presence and renew a shared commitment to Jewish religious experience. Progressive Jews observe the biblical calendar. Like Jews in Israel, we leave out the additional second day of the festivals that were added in Rabbinic times for Diaspora

observance when there was a doubt about the precise time and day of each festival's arrival.

### **WHY DO PROGRESSIVE RABBIS MARRY IN THEIR SYNAGOGUES JEWS WHO CANNOT BE MARRIED IN ORTHODOX SYNAGOGUES?**

Most marriages performed in progressive synagogues are in no way different from marriages performed in orthodox synagogues. However, there are several categories of people barred from marriage by orthodox law.

(a) A Kohen is prohibited from marrying a divorcee or a proselyte. Progressive Judaism does not recognise the special status of descendants of the ancient Temple priesthood. There is no possibility of the restoration of the biblically-prescribed sacrificial cult performed by members of this priestly caste. Consequently the suitability or unsuitability of marriage partners for such a special category of Jews does not arise.

(b) According to halakhah, a divorcee cannot remarry unless she has received a Jewish divorce document (Get) from her former husband. The Get only permits men to divorce their wives. Women may not initiate the divorce proceedings and this violates one of the principles of Progressive Judaism. The progressive rabbinate will make every effort to help people obtain a Get; however, we will not allow women to be blackmailed or to be barred from remarriage. A non-orthodox Get treats men and women as equals and many synagogues quietly arrange their own divorce procedures.

(c) Orthodox practice in case of the remarriage of a deserted wife (agunah) is a very difficult process, often causing hardship. Progressive Judaism, on purely humanitarian grounds, will allow such women to remarry as soon as the civil courts in the country of their domicile allow them to do so.

(d) Orthodox law requires a childless widow to undergo the ceremony of h.alitzah (Deut. 25: 5-10) before allowing her to remarry. Progressive Judaism has abolished this ceremony, not only because of its degrading character, but also because it has become pointless. It only made sense in a purely agricultural economy in biblical times where an heir to the family fields was an economic necessity.

(e) We affirm the principle, forcefully stated in Ezekiel 18:20, that children are not to be held responsible for the action of their parents. We therefore reject the law of the mamzer that disqualifies from marriage, except to each other, the children of unions prohibited by the biblical laws of physical relationship and affinity.

It should be noted that orthodox rabbis will not recognise that a proselyte converted by a progressive rabbi is Jewish, nor is a child of such a marriage recognised as a Jew when the mother is the convert. This constitutes an enormous theoretical problem in America where orthodox Jews constitute a very small minority. Following the collapse of the former Soviet Union 800,000 Jews arrived in Israel whose 'Jewishness' cannot be verified. This has shaken many traditional attitudes towards status, religious conversion and Jewish identity.

In a progressive Jewish marriage ceremony the groom does not 'acquire' his wife but the bride and groom marry each other as adults who are equal. This is one of the reasons that

more and more Israelis are turning to progressive rabbis—both Reform and Conservative—to officiate at their marriages.

It must be stated very clearly that all weddings performed in progressive synagogues are valid marriages. They are recognised in civil law in Australia and New Zealand and all the countries of our geographic region. They are recognised by Israeli civil law. The orthodox rabbinate may reject a non-orthodox document but with the growth of progressive communities around the world this rejection is meaningless. A Jewish marriage document (Ketubah) is signed and witnessed. Our marriage ceremonies include all the traditional elements—apart from those that imply that men and women are not religiously and socially equal.

### **HOW DOES PROGRESSIVE JUDAISM IN AUSTRALIA AND NEW ZEALAND REGARD INTERMARRIAGE ?**

Our synagogue movement completely rejects mixed marriage. Although there are some reform rabbis in North America who will officiate at marriages between Jews and non-Jews there are none outside the United States who will do so. We believe that if a Jewish person wishes to marry a non-Jew it should be under civil auspices. The commitment needed to establish and conduct a Jewish home and raise Jewish children is very hard to find if both parties are not Jewish. The words and the ceremonies of a Jewish wedding ceremony do not apply when one of the partners is not Jewish. We also believe that it is sensible for the couple to decide which religion is going to shape the future of their family and their household. If adults cannot decide where they belong, their children in turn must experience a lack of a sense of identity and belonging.

A Jewish wedding is a public commitment to establish a Jewish home. The huppah under which the new couple stands is a symbol of the home they will share. Many non-Jews decide after they are married to Jews to convert to Judaism. This is not a simple or easy decision and requires a full course of study, including knowledge of Hebrew and an understanding of Judaism and Jewish history. The process is lengthy and when the applicant feels ready he or she is interviewed by a 'Bet Din' (a Council of Rabbis). Males must be circumcised and all converts attend a mikveh before their formal conversion ceremony.

In biblical times, the status of a child was determined by the father of the child. In the Roman Empire social status was determined by the maternal line. It was no accident that Jewish law changed during Roman hegemony so that a child's status was to be established by the religion of the mother. This is still orthodox practice. The child of a Jewish mother is Jewish by halakhah even if that individual has had no Jewish education. According to Progressive Judaism, however, this biological qualification is not decisive. If the child of a mixed marriage has been brought up and educated as a Jew and becomes a Bar or Bat Mitzvah, or otherwise demonstrated his or her commitment to Jewish identity and knowledge, then a progressive synagogue will accept that person as a Jew in good faith. Some progressive rabbis will request the conversion of that person to Judaism, based on their previous knowledge, while others will accept their status without need for conversion.

## **WHAT IS THE ATTITUDE OF PROGRESSIVE JUDAISM TO NON-JEWS?**

The Torah repeatedly commands Jews to care for the rights of the stranger. At the heart of the Torah is the command ‘And you shall love your neighbour as yourself. I am the Lord’. (Lev. 19:18).

Jews believe that every human being is created in the image of God and therefore every person is worthy of honour, respect and a full measure of dignity, regardless of race, gender or religious affiliation. Jewish tradition teaches ‘Whoever sustains one soul is considered to have sustained the whole world’.

Progressive Judaism understands that religious faith and practice is the expression of humanity’s awe in the presence of the Infinite and that there are therefore many paths to God. We are opposed to any form of religious imperialism or missionary activity. Jewish law and lore are an expression of our ancient covenant with God but even the biblical prophets accepted that other peoples could also claim that same covenantal relationship of being chosen.

Modern biblical scholarship, archaeology and the development of western philosophy and theology have brought Jews and Christians together in many shared fields of study. The Shoah has had a profound impact on the way many Christians relate to the tragic history of ‘religiously inspired’ anti-Semitism. Many Christian scholars now study Judaism at rabbinical seminaries and universities in order to deepen their knowledge of the origins of their own faith. Progressive Judaism welcomes this meeting of the minds through scholarship and shared respect. We recognise that ultimate truth is mysterious and manifold and that other religious traditions sincerely seek and find religious truth in many different ways. We therefore welcome and affirm the need to respect other religions. Through dialogue with them, especially in a multicultural society, we can promote mutual understanding, friendship and spiritual enrichment.

## **HOW DOES PROGRESSIVE JUDAISM CONTRIBUTE TO JEWISH SURVIVAL?**

We believe religion should be relevant and that Jewish life can be at home in free lands. We believe that without a modern, rational approach to Judaism many, if not most, Jews who live in lands of freedom would have been lost to Judaism. Assimilation means the disappearance of a distinctive way of life through intermarriage, apathy or ignorance. By providing a mechanism for Jews to be part of contemporary society without denying their Jewish identity, Progressive Judaism contributes substantially to Jewish survival.

Progressive Jews have built new congregations, schools and Rabbinic colleges all over the world. The Progressive movement has pioneered many aspects of Jewish religious education. It fosters Jewish art and music, literature and scholarship. Throughout the world, men and women of progressive Jewish congregations lead many different Jewish groups—charitable, Zionist, cultural and social. In Europe and America there are many progressive Jewish congregations that are now more than 200 years old. The descendants of the families of these congregations are very much involved in Jewish life. Progressive Judaism in Australia is now 70 years old and the great great-grandchildren of founding members are now enrolled in our schools.

## **WHAT IS THE RELATIONSHIP OF PROGRESSIVE JUDAISM TO ZIONISM?**

Nineteenth century Judaism in Western Europe was, with few exceptions, strongly anti-Zionist. Both orthodoxy and reform opposed Zionism for different reasons. The Progressive movement believed that Judaism could only survive political freedom by stressing Judaism's compatibility with its environment. Orthodoxy believed it was impious to pre-empt the coming of the Messiah.

Both American Reform and German Liberalism defined Judaism as a religious movement. It was thought that Judaism had ceased to contain a national element with the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem by the Romans in 70 CE. They were not aware that Judaism had retained a significant presence in the Land of Israel until the rise of Islam in the seventh century. Even after this time the Jewish link with the land was never broken. In the face of strong political and religious opposition to Jewish emancipation in the 19th century Jewish leaders had no wish to foster any suspicion of 'dual loyalty'. Ethnic identity and particularism were seen to be enemies of religious universalism. However, there were leading reform rabbis who were early supporters of Zionism.

Rabbi Leo Baeck, the leader of Germany Jewry, was a lonely and courageous Zionist in the rabbinical synods of the late 19th century. Rabbi Judah L Magnes became the founding President of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. Rabbi Abba Hillel Silver of Cleveland represented the Jews of Palestine at the United Nations before the proclamation of the State of Israel. Rabbi Stephen Wise founded the World Jewish Congress in order to present a united Jewish response to anti-Semitism and aggression.

Two factors dramatically changed the relationship of Progressive Judaism to Zionism. The first was the Shoah and the second was the establishment of the State of Israel. The revival of Hebrew as a living language of the people in its own land has changed the direction of Jewish education in the Diaspora. In 1980 our Australian synagogues fostered the development of Netzer (Noar Tzioni Reformi) our own dynamic youth movement. Through Netzer, hundreds of our young people have spent a year in Israel and some have chosen to return there and to make aliyah. The World Union for Progressive Judaism and the Reform Zionist Movement (Arzenu) belong to the World Zionist Organisation and take an active part in its programs.

Today, with very few exceptions, Jews look to Israel as a spiritual, religious and cultural centre. The historic Jewish homeland, where Hebrew is the language and Jewish values shape its daily life, profoundly influences our Jewish self-image. The five million Jews who live in Israel already form a significant proportion of world Jewry. The manner in which they celebrate their Jewish heritage deeply influences the Diaspora. Jewish identity around the world has become intertwined with the destiny of the State of Israel. This is reflected in our prayer books which celebrate Yom Ha'atzmaut (Israel's Independence Day) as a festival of religious significance.

A disturbing ideological gap between 'secular' and 'religious' Jews now exists in Israel. This crisis of credibility has been deepened by the involvement of religion with politics and the nature of the Israeli political system in which small groups can exert severe political pressure on the government in pursuit of financial concessions and exemption from military service. The rise of ultra-orthodox (h.aredi) political groups who violently disapprove of secular education and the State of Israel has widened the gulf between

those involved in the development of a dynamic modern state and the Jewish religious establishment.

Once again, after two thousand years of waiting there is a Jewish State in its historic homeland and Jews cannot become the defenceless targets of bigotry. Yet the Jewish Diaspora remains vital and creative and Israel has not yet fulfilled the prophetic vision of becoming 'a light to the nations'. Very few have remembered that ancient Judea drew strength from its relationship to the Jews who lived outside the Land of Israel and vice versa. Zionism has not made the Diaspora irrelevant and Israel has immensely strengthened the Diaspora. Our young people who visit Israel and who choose to live there have built a vital bridge of self-confidence and self-knowledge.

#### **COMMENTARY**

We believe that the renewal and perpetuation of Jewish national life in Eretz Yisrael is a necessary condition for the realization of the physical and spiritual redemption of the Jewish people and of all humanity. While that day of redemption remains but a distant yearning, we express the fervent hope that Medinat Yisrael (the State of Israel), living in peace with its neighbours, will hasten the redemption of Am Yisrael (the people of Israel), and the fulfilment of our messianic dream of universal peace under the sovereignty of God.

The achievements of modern Zionism in the creation of the State of Israel, in reviving the Hebrew language, in absorbing millions of immigrants, in transforming desolate wastes into blooming forest and fields, in generating a thriving new economy and society, are an unparalleled triumph of the Jewish spirit.

We stand firm in our love of Zion. We resolve to work for the day when waves of Jewish pride and confidence will infuse every Jewish heart, in fulfilment of the promise: 'When God restores the fortunes of Zion we shall be like dreamers. Our mouths will fill with laughter and our tongues with songs of joy. Then shall they say among the nations, "God has done great things for them."'

'Reform Judaism and Zionism—A Centenary Platform', The Central Conference of American Rabbis, 1997

#### **WHAT IS THE STATUS OF PROGRESSIVE JUDAISM IN ISRAEL?**

Despite the fundamental commitment in the Declaration of Independence of May 1948 to establish freedom of religion and conscience, non-orthodox religious Jews still encounter problems within the political structure of Israel. These involve official recognition of the work of a rabbi—such as marriage, conversion, divorce and funerals. Only orthodox rabbis are permitted to perform these functions in Israel and have them sanctioned by law.

Paradoxically, weddings and conversions performed by progressive rabbis outside Israel are recognised by the State of Israel although not by the state-sanctioned monopolistic rabbinate of Israel. The question of 'Who is a Jew?' has been repeatedly raised by the Israeli orthodox political parties in the Knesset claiming that only orthodox conversions and marriages should be recognised by the State of Israel. Both the Knesset and the High Court rejected this claim on the basis of democracy and on the basic right in Israel's

Declaration of Independence concerning freedom of religion. After many political crises and financial scandals in mid-2000 the Israeli Government briefly closed down the Ministry of Religion indicating that religious affiliation is a private matter.

Public attitudes towards Reform and Conservative Judaism have changed remarkably during the last decade even though non-orthodox Judaism in Israel still has a long, difficult struggle ahead of it. The Israeli Progressive movement has established day schools, a scout movement, kibbutzim, a rabbinical seminary and a social justice centre. The existence of organised orthodox political parties and their crucial role in determining the government—due to the Israeli parliamentary system of proportional representation—means that the development of our congregations and institutions is frequently blocked. Progressive Judaism in Israel is engaged in a continuing struggle for equality, not only for itself, but for all those who are discriminated against by the application of the orthodox interpretation of halakhah.

Despite all the official obstacles Yahadut Mitkademet (Progressive Judaism) is making extraordinary progress in Israel. The headquarters of the World Union for Progressive Judaism is to be found in Jerusalem. There are now five progressive synagogues in Jerusalem and three in the surrounding development towns in the Jerusalem area. Israelis are now accustomed to the existence of women rabbis and are turning in ever increasing numbers to the Reform Movement for the celebration of their weddings. Many educators turn to our rabbis for advice in the teaching of Jewish studies and the schools affiliated to our movement have long waiting lists.

### **HOW MANY PROGRESSIVE JEWS ARE THERE?**

By the year 2001 there were 22 progressive synagogues and groups belonging to our Union for Progressive Judaism in Australia, Asia and New Zealand. This represents 8000 adult members. There are two day schools, and a Zionist youth movement called Netzer. There are part-time religious schools and a Reform Zionist Organisation called Arzi. One-third of the Jews of Australia and New Zealand are either members of our movement or turn to it in times of need. We are a constituent member of the World Union for Progressive Judaism which was founded in 1926. The World Union is affiliated to the World Zionist Organisation and the World Jewish Congress and is a non-governmental agency represented at the United Nations.

Demographic surveys in North America indicate that 92 % of affiliated Jews are members of progressive congregations. Progressive congregations are developing in increasing numbers in Europe and in the countries of the former Soviet Union.

Throughout the world more than a million and a half affiliated Reform, Liberal, Progressive and Reconstructionist Jews belong to the World Union for Progressive Judaism while the Conservative (Masorti) Movement claims a further million adherents.

### **A GLOSSARY**

**AGUNA:** A woman whose status is “anchored” or “bound” to her husband who may refuse to give her a religious divorce, or who may be dead or missing.

**ALIYAH:** Literally “to arise” or “go up” and hence used to describe being called up to the Torah and to immigrate to Israel.

ASHKENAZI: A biblical word which became the collective description for the Jewish community of Europe.

BAR/BAT MITZVAH: Literally “son/daughter of the commandment”. The ceremony celebrating a 13 year old’s religious coming of age.

BET DIN: Literally “House of Judgement”. A Jewish Religious Court consisting of three rabbis or qualified judges.

ERETZ YISRAEL: The Land of Israel.

GET: A religious document of divorce. The traditional initiative of granting a Get must be made by the husband.

HALAKHAH: Literally “Law” as understood in the Talmud. Popularly thought to be connected with the Hebrew verb “to walk”. A term describing the legal portion of the Talmud in contrast to the non-legal Aggadah.

H.ALITZAH: A ceremony in which a childless sister-in-law repudiates her dead husband’s brother whose biblical duty it is to marry her.

H.AREDI: Ultra-orthodox.

H.ASSIDIM: (also written Chassidim) “The pious ones”. Followers of a religious movement that began in Eastern Europe in the 18th century as a protest against the perceived rigidity of Jewish life.

HALLEL: The psalms of praise (Psalm 113 to Psalm 118) sung at festivals.

HAVDALAH: Literally “division”—when the Shabbat is divided from the rest of the week.

H.UPPAH: The marriage canopy.

KADDISH: The prayer that praises God and looks forward to God’s sovereignty. It is not a prayer for the dead but an affirmation of life. There are longer and shorter forms of the kaddish which is written in Aramaic and is said as a prayer of thanks for life, prayer and Torah.

KETUVAH: A written document that is witnessed at the Jewish marriage ceremony.

KIDDUSH: The prayer of blessing for wine. A symbol of joy and of life.

KIDDUSHIN: Marriage.

K’LLAL YISRAEL: The whole community of Israel.

KOHEN: The hereditary caste of priests in biblical times. (Plural—Kohanim) Since the destruction of the Temple in the year 70 CE their separate status and genealogy is in doubt.

MAH.ZOR: The Prayer Book for the High Holydays.

MAMZER: A child who is the product of a forbidden union through incest or adultery.

MIDRASH: Classical rabbinic biblical interpretation. A collection of biblical sermonic material dating from the second to fifth centuries CE.

MIKVEH: A ritual bath. A pool filled with pure, natural water enabling the user to attain ritual purity.

MINHAG: A custom and not a law.

MINYAN: The quorum required for public service of worship.

MISHNAH: A six volume compendium of post biblical law ascribed to Judah the Prince written about 200 CE. The commentary on the Mishnah is the Gemara. The two together make up the Talmud.

MITNAGDIM: Literally “the opposers”. Those orthodox Jews who opposed Chassidism.

MITZVAH: A commandment that is either found in the biblical text or else introduced by later tradition. Mitzvah can also mean “good deed.” (Plural—Mitzvot)

SEPHARDI: A biblical word which came to describe “Spain” and the Jews from around the Mediterranean.

SEDER: Literally “Order”. The religious service that is held at home on the eve of Passover.

SHABBAT: The Sabbath.

SHEKHINAH: The inner presence of God.

SHOAH: The biblical word used to describe the extermination of the Jews in Europe. Original meaning was a sacrificial holocaust.

SHULH.AN ARUKH: ‘The Set Table’ written by Rabbi Joseph Karo (1488-1575), a Sephardi Jew, and edited by Rabbi Moses Isserles as a guide for Ashkenazi Jews.

SIDDUR: Daily and Sabbath Prayerbook.

TALMUD: A commentary on the Mishnah which records the discussion on Jewish law and legend written in Israel and Babylonia between the third and fifth centuries of the Common Era.

TANAKH: The acronym for the Hebrew Bible. Torah, Nevi'im (prophets), Ketuvim (writings).

TESHUVAH: Repentance.

TIKKUN OLAM: Literally “The repair of the world”—Social Justice.

TISH'AH B'AV: The ninth day of the Hebrew month of Av and the anniversary of the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem and the expulsion of the Jews from Spain.

TORAH: Religious traditions, teachings and law. ‘The Torah’ also refers to the first five books of the Tanakh.

TZEDAKAH: Literally “Righteous” or victorious acts” but translated as “charity”.

YAMIM NORAIM: The Days of Awe or the High Holydays.

YAHADUT MITKADEMET: Progressive Judaism.