

---

---

## Mission

In the ancient tradition of our prophets, sages, scholars, mystics and rebbes, we seek to fashion a contemporary voice for the timeless message of Torah—Be Holy.

## Values

Our voice is inclusive, egalitarian, democratic, just, compassionate, wise and fearless. We honor the past, not through imitation, but through study; using it as a compass pointing us toward holiness rather than as a map leading us over old ground.

## Principles

There can be no Judaism without God, Torah, Israel, *mitzvot* and *mentschlichkeit*.

## Definitions And Obligations

God is the Source and Substance of all Reality, the transcendent unchanging One and the immanent ever-changing Many. Our obligation to God is to be holy and to move the world toward holiness. Being holy means devoting ourselves to the spiritual challenge of ethical monotheism; to awaken to the unity and interdependence of all things; to realize there is but one race, one morality, one planet; to act justly and compassionately; and to hold ourselves and the world to the highest ethical standards.

Torah is the diary of the Jewish search for holiness. Our approach to Torah is primarily, though not exclusively, *midrashic*. Our concern is not simply with what Torah says, but with what Torah means. Our obligation to Torah is to study her. This further obligates us to basic Hebrew literacy and a familiarity with her commentators.

Israel reflects our tri-fold identity as people, nation, and community. As a people, we are committed to caring for and defending Jewry worldwide. As a nation, we are loyal to the Zionist ideal. As a community, we secure a place for Judaism in our homes, our neighborhoods, and our national agenda. Being Israel obligates us to alleviate Jewish suffering, to visit Israel, to establish Jewish homes and households, to promote Jewish learning and literacy, and to join or create synagogues and *chavurot*.

*Mitzvot* are the obligations that come with choosing to be a serious Jew. There are six essential categories of *mitzvot*: *tefillah* (daily prayer and meditation); Shabbat and holy days; *eco-kashrut* (ethically and environmentally sound consumption); *tzedakah* (generosity); *teshuvah* (perfecting self); and *tikkun* (perfecting society). How one meets these obligations is open to choice, meeting them itself is not.

*Mentschlichkeit* is the acting out of holiness in the world. *Mentschlichkeit* obligates us to visit the ill; comfort the grieving; feed the hungry; house the homeless; clothe the naked; avoid hurtful speech; do justly; act compassionately; walk humbly.

## Conclusion

Judaism is an ancient and ongoing experiment in human holiness. Judaism is not and has never been fixed or monolithic. Judaism survives because in every age she has lovers who dare to speak to her and of her in the vernacular of their time. Jack Moline is correct when he says that what ties all these experiments together is a shared reverence for God, Torah and Israel. He is wrong when he contends that we Jewish Renewalniks do not share that reverence. In an era when most Jews have divorced themselves from Judaism, it is precisely our love for God, Torah and Israel that compels us to take up the challenge of Sinai and create a holy, just, compassionate and authentic Judaism for both ourselves and our world. †

## Jewish renewal: another perspective

Judy Petsonk

An exciting and significant Jewish Renewal is going on in America, and it will be a shame if Jewish leaders don't notice and encourage it. By Jewish Renewal I mean the return to concern for spirituality among a wide range of contemporary Jews.

Evidence of this return to spirituality includes a surge in study of sacred texts, such as the Torah study sessions at the Council of Jewish Federation's General Assembly in 1995, the *bat mitzvah* of thousands of adult women, including 120 at last summer's Hadassah national convention; the growth of national and regional study *kallot* in the Reform movement; the many families trying to make teenage *bat* or *bar mitzvah* a spiritual and emotional landmark through *tzedakah* projects and study of texts on Jewish ethics.

## Origins

The post-1960s *havurah* movement, with its focus on meaningful prayer, was an expression of the return to

---

JUDY PETSONK is the author of *Taking Judaism Personally: Creating a Meaningful Spiritual Life*, The Free Press 1996.

---

---

spirituality. *Havurah* movement leaders have now come of age as leaders in the larger Jewish community, and have nurtured this broader return. Arthur Waskow, who popularized the term “Jewish Renewal” through his newsletter *Menorah* (now *New Menorah*), was active in the *havurah* movement and is a key figure in ALEPH: The Alliance for Jewish Renewal, of which Elat Chayyim is a part. Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, founder of ALEPH, was a mentor to many *havurah* leaders. But Rabbi Jack Moline is mistaken if he thinks his experience at Elat Chayyim is representative of the full sweep of Jewish Renewal. ALEPH is only one variety of a much broader and genuinely significant phenomenon.

### Rebuilding Our Connection To God

The heart of Jewish Renewal is an attempt to grapple in an honest and open way with the hard spiritual questions posed by the 20th century. For nearly 50 years after the Holocaust, the average American Jew avoided talking about God. Jewish identity was expressed, not primarily through worship, but through support of Israel. Jewish Renewal had to come into being because with a distance of three generations from the great Eastern European immigration, the ethnic ties that bound American Jews together and the social exclusion that enforced our togetherness are gone. If we don't find meaning in Judaism as well as Jewishness there will be no future generations of Jews.

The 20th century, however, mauled our belief in God and our sense of God's presence in our lives. It's hard for most American Jews to believe, not only in a God of law, but in any God at all. Yet somehow among members of the Renewal movement, wonder emerged as strongly as doubt. We may not have the awe that one feels toward a monarch and his laws, but we have the awe that comes from an encounter with the vast complexity of the cosmos. With that wonder, we are trying to rebuild, through Jewish tradition, a sense of connection to God. We are asking hard and ultimately renewing, redemptive questions: What kind of God can we believe in? How can we encounter that God through Jewish tradition? What should or can be the relationship between us Jews and our God? We are answering in diverse, and I think constructive ways.

Different parts of the Jewish Renewal movement have focused on different aspects of our contemporary spiritual dilemma. Some groups, like those returning to Orthodoxy, have focused on rebuilding our shattered sense of order in the universe, while others, including the feminist and neo-mystical movements, have focused on rebuilding our shattered sense of connection to God. It is true that

many contemporary Jews, inside and outside the Jewish Renewal movement, have trouble with the idea of *el kayam*, a God of absolutes. That's partly because our experience does not convince us of the existence of a God who rewards good and punishes evil.

It is also because language and metaphor are our doors to connection with God. The language of monarchy is alien to the experience of most contemporary Jews. The language of male domination (as well as the restrictions on women's role that went with it) left many women feeling disconnected from God or from Judaism as a path to God. Our first task was to find a way of thinking about God that makes the connection intellectually and emotionally possible. Then we could respond to the many insights about God made possible by Jewish tradition, including the sense of a power beyond our own and a set of demands extrinsic to our own wishes.

### Synthesizing American And Jewish Cultures

The post-sixties generation was somewhat chaotic. We questioned many norms. Jewish Renewal, however, is not a distillate of rebellion. It is an attempt at synthesis between tradition and the questioning attitude cherished by both Jewish and American cultures. It is a longing to find meeting points between intellectual freedom and moral structure, between American individualism and the demands for conformity made by the communal Jewish way of life.

Far from rejecting the idea of divine law, many in the Jewish Renewal movement are drawn to the idea of law and structure. For the many assimilated Jews returning to Orthodoxy, spiritual renewal comes in the embrace of the law. Reform Jews interested in renewal recently have returned to practices such as keeping kosher. In adopting many, if not all of the traditional practices, participants in the more liberal wings of the Jewish Renewal movement also recognize that a system of laws forms the core of Jewish civilization, and that if a critical mass of Jews does not follow a critical mass of these practices, there may be a radical, and perhaps irreparable, break in the evolving continuity of Jewish tradition.

Lack of deep familiarity with our texts, as Rabbi Moline suggests, is a weakness of all contemporary Judaism, and in particular of liberal Judaisms. If law is the backbone, texts are the flesh and blood of our tradition. The drive to find a synthesis between old and new which is characteristic of Jewish Renewal has been a partial corrective to this problem. More people are studying Jewish texts now than when I was growing up in the 1950s because we are being taught to seek and find the connections between the texts and our lives. As Jews

---

---

have always done, today's students are critical respondents to their texts rather than passive absorbers. People who identify as part of the Jewish Renewal movement have challenged the interpretation of texts which have been used to exclude women and homosexuals. We see these restrictions as conflicting with the central value both Jewish and American traditions place on the worth of the individual. We are aware that our texts, even if they were divinely inspired, were influenced by the eras in which they were composed. Jewish leaders from Hillel on have felt compelled to deal with the ways in which the received tradition was out of step with contemporary realities. The fact that some are still attempting to do this is a sign of health, not of decay in our tradition.

It is *chutzpah*, a divisive *chutzpah*, to say that what we are creating is not Judaism. Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz likes to tell the story of the frog parents who looked at the tadpoles in the pond, and said, "Where did we go wrong? They don't look like us, they don't act like us, how will our kind continue?"

The most radical Jewish Renewal practices and ideas are far closer to received Jewish tradition than rabbinic Judaism was to ancient Temple Judaism. Judaism is the religious culture that has emerged as Jews have continued to ask for centuries, "How do we connect to God NOW, after all that has happened to us Jews?" The good news is that we're asking again. ✦

## Endthoughts

### Moms' jobs

Pamela S. Nadell

It has been a bad week for the gender role divide in my small slice of the American Jewish community. It started the Friday before Mother's Day. Posted on the door of the four-year-old class of my daughter's Jewish pre-school was a list of mom's jobs. Next to each child's name, the teacher had written what s/he had said. The list included: "Moms stay with you; dads don't." "Moms take you places because dads don't get days off." "Dads

don't put babies to sleep." One child grasped, in his case accurately, the biological determinism his friends sensed: "Moms have babies; dads don't." No, I don't know how the teacher phrased the question, which surely shaped the responses. But I do know that one teacher pointing to the sign said: "It's the fifties."

But it is not the fifties when, as sociologist Sylvia Barack Fishman has commented, Jewish women had to defend themselves if they went out to work. Now with three-quarters of Jewish women ages 25-44 in the work force—a third of them as professionals, those who choose full-time work as homemakers find themselves in the minority, sometimes on the defensive. Certainly this 1990s profile of American Jewish women rings true in this pre-school class, where, if the children's comments reflect their households' reality, three-quarters of the moms have two full-time jobs.

### Harm Amidst Good

Instead of "Moms' Jobs" revealing what I thought was a minor setback, young children's skewed perspectives, the rigidity of gender division in my segment of the American Jewish community seems, after a visit to my son's school, worse than I had imagined.

It was Yom Yerushalayim, and for weeks my son's Jewish day school had been calling for parent volunteers to help with the celebration. Regretting that I have so little time to volunteer there, I decided to sign on for three hours. When I arrived, I was put to work tacking on the walls a parade of feet the second-graders had drawn to symbolize the pilgrimage to Jerusalem. There were but three parent volunteers among the 100 second graders that afternoon. After all, most dads and moms were at work and cannot boast my unusually flexible schedule. And I was not surprised by the mundane, routine task I was given. Someone has to do this kind of work, if it is to get done, and I had volunteered to help.

I did not even think much on this, until some 600 children, teachers, administrators, and parent volunteers assembled for the closing program. There I ran into another parent, a father, who also happens to be a rabbi. When I asked what he had been doing that day, he noted that he had been invited to come teach about Jerusalem. And so had several other rabbis, all male.

As I looked around the room, I could not help but wonder, especially in light of the list of moms' jobs, about the message we are sending to this next generation of American Jews. As one would expect, all the teachers in this lower school are female. Only the headmaster is a man. In the group singing, his lower-range voice boomed out over that of the children and women. Was I

---

PROFESSOR PAMELA S. NADELL is Director of the Jewish Studies Program at American University.