

A JUDAISM FOR
THE TWENTY-FIRST
CENTURY

Rabbi Pete Tobias

Adapted for Australia and New Zealand
by Rabbi Jonathan Keren-Black

Dedicated to the memory of Rabbi Dr John D Rayner, CBE.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many people have helped with the production of this book. It would probably never have seen the light of day had I not found myself temporarily immobilised with a snapped Achilles tendon in the summer of 2005, so I must thank my son Adam for the tennis game that was the occasion of that injury, which enabled me to compose the first draft on a laptop while watching England regain the Ashes. Thanks also to Rosita Rosenberg, who saw it in its first and final stages, and to Rabbi Andrew Goldstein who has been present at every stage of its (and my) development. Colleagues and friends too numerous to mention took time to read and comment on it at subsequent stages, but special thanks go to Rabbi David Goldberg for two lunches and a parking ticket. Many people at Liberal Judaism have helped see the project through to fruition: thanks to Penny Beral and, most especially, to the long suffering Selina O'Dwyer. A mention must go to Vincent Harding who patiently bore the constant demands of changes in design. Particular gratitude is due to John Eidinow, without whose diligent reading of the various versions, accompanied by advice, guidance and encouragement (usually provided over coffee at Puccino's) the book would be much poorer. And finally to Robbie, who has so patiently put up with my moodiness, absent-mindedness and constant need to rewrite a sentence or two at the most unlikely hours.

PT April 2007

I am delighted that the Progressive movement in Australia, which was founded with much support and encouragement from Lily Montagu in London is this year celebrating its eightieth anniversary. My colleague Rabbi Jonathan Keren-Black, assisted by the careful eye of Philippa McMahan, has produced a version tailored for use in that region, which continues the connection forged so many years ago between London and Melbourne by Lily Montagu.

PT December 2010

INTRODUCTION

This book seeks to set out the principles of Progressive Judaism and apply those principles to contemporary society and culture, the world of today in which Progressive Judaism and its adherents must find their moral bearings.

Reconciling their beliefs with an ever-changing world is not a new experience for Jews. One of this book's fundamental assertions is that Judaism has constantly adapted itself to meet the challenges posed to it by the need to survive in evolving societies – had it not done so, this ancient religion would long since have been written out of history. As we enter a third millennium (according to one particular method of counting time), the need for religion to live up to its potential as a positive force in human development has never seemed more urgent. In its purest form, religion encapsulates humankind's most noble aspirations in the search for life's meaning and purpose. In practice, sadly, it often seems that, amid claims of divine preference, religion has lost its way in a maze of particularistic ritual that does no justice to the human spirit or its Creator.

'A Judaism for the Twenty-First Century' and its original UK version, 'Liberal Judaism, A Judaism for the Twenty-First Century' are grandchildren. Their parent is 'Judaism for Today', written in 1978 by Rabbi John D Rayner and Rabbi Bernard Hooker. Their grandparent is 'The Essentials of Liberal Judaism', by Rabbi Israel Mattuck in 1947. The family in which it proudly and humbly takes its place (proudly since it is an honour to make a contribution to that family, humbly because of the greatness of its predecessors) is The World Union for Progressive Judaism, the movement that was established in London in 1926, whose headquarters are today in Jerusalem.

In 1809, in Seesen, Germany, the first Jewish services were held where men and women were able to sit together, use was made of the everyday language, and the prayers were somewhat shortened and modified. Over the following two hundred years, Progressive Judaism has sought to discern and emphasise the universalistic concerns and the messianic purpose of Judaism, both enshrined in the visions of Israel's ancient prophets. In this regard, its emphasis sometimes differs from what might be called mainstream Judaism. Although

Progressive Judaism shares its heritage with all Jews around the world, it values sincerity and integrity even above ritual and tradition. Therefore it emphasises the demand for justice implicit in the establishment of biblical laws more than adherence to the tiniest details of laws and customs that have been derived from them over the generations. Much of present-day Judaism, it would seem, is more concerned with these laws and customs, rituals and traditions than with the ethical and moral imperatives that inspired them and that underpin them.

Progressive Judaism strives to rediscover and emphasise the underlying principles that have been at the heart of this ancient faith since its inception more than three thousand years ago.

It is this emphasis, placing the prophetic demands for justice ahead of acknowledging Judaism's age-old traditions for their own sake, that makes Progressive Judaism unique. This stance is reflected in another, central document, 'Affirmations of Liberal Judaism', written by Rabbi John D Rayner in 1992 (the two constituent movements of the World Union for Progressive Judaism operating in Britain are the Liberal Movement and the Reform Movement). Re-edited in 2006, it lists forty-two propositions about Progressive Judaism. The first twenty-two map out the ground shared with other branches of Judaism. The second twenty list those aspects that give Progressive Judaism its unique character.

Each of the forty-two affirmations inspires a chapter of this book. Building on Rabbi Rayner's 1992 work, the complete text offers an overview of Judaism from this Progressive perspective. It is written both in the expectation that it will, in due course, be superseded, and in the hope that this will be the case. A Judaism that does not develop is not a living Judaism. What follows, then, is a picture of where Progressive Judaism stands at the beginning of the twenty-first century. To quote from its predecessor, it is an ancient faith with a modern message. That message, and this work, tells how Progressive Judaism is at the cutting edge of a religion constantly evolving. As readers will discover, Progressive Judaism challenges the assumptions that modern-day Judaism makes about itself, insists that its adherents confront today's major issues with the honesty and integrity our age demands, and brings to that confrontation the ethical and spiritual

awareness that inspired the earliest creators of Judaism and the founders of Progressive Judaism itself.

This is Progressive Judaism: a Judaism for the twenty-first century.

Rabbi Pete Tobias
Elstree, April 2007

Rabbi Jonathan Keren-Black
Melbourne, December 2010
Chanukkah

Part 1: Common Ground

1

JUDAISM



We affirm our commitment to Judaism, the cultural heritage of the Jewish People, and the centrality within that heritage of the Jewish religion, which, since the time of Abraham and Sarah, has proclaimed the sovereignty of the One God.

Judaism

The beginning of the twenty-first century may seem an unlikely time for a book about religion to be written – especially a religion that is well over three thousand years old. There are those who would argue that many of the difficulties with which our world is confronted today are a consequence of religion and therefore are unlikely to be solved by it. But every religion began as an attempt by human beings to understand their place on this earth and give meaning and purpose to their lives. Subsequent development and (mis-) interpretation of religious doctrine has led to conflict, it is true, but the nature and the role of religion remain unchanged. It is the attempt to provide answers to life's questions, comfort through life's uncertainties and meaning to human existence.

If this is the yardstick for a religion, then Judaism, stretching back across countless generations, can certainly claim to have worked towards fulfilling that role. The fact that it has survived for this length of time would suggest that it has, in some measure, succeeded. It has done so by developing and changing, by adapting itself to new challenges and new environments at all stages of its history. Progressive Judaism today represents one broad stream of this adaptation and development, the specific characteristics of which will be more fully explored in the second half of this book. This opening section will explore those elements of Judaism that are agreed upon and shared by all strands of this four thousand year old tradition.

Judaism has long been regarded as being more than a religion. One of the most popular descriptions of Judaism is that it is a 'way of life'. But which way of life is being referred to in such a statement? Is the reference to devout ultra-Orthodox Jewish men praying earnestly at the Western Wall in Jerusalem? A Jewish family gathered around a table watching mother light

candles at a *Seder*¹ or a Shabbat² meal? Or bagels filled with smoked salmon and cream cheese? How do these elements go together to define the cultural heritage of the Jewish religion?

The very fact that Judaism has such a long history and that the world has changed so immeasurably since the days of Abraham and Sarah, traditionally regarded as its founding patriarch and matriarch³, confirms Judaism's recognition of the constantly developing nature of the world. This religion continues to ask and assess, re-form and re-evaluate those questions about life to which Judaism seeks to provide the answers. As such, on a theoretical level, certainly, Judaism can be seen as a framework from within which its adherents can continue to search for answers to those fundamental human questions about the meaning and purpose of life.

In practical terms, of course, Judaism is so much more than this. It is a culture, with literature, traditions, beliefs and practices, which have developed and grown in all the places where Jewish communities have made their home. All of these elements of Judaism are precious and we cherish and value them as reminders of our past, even if we do not always make them part of our present. In the end, it comes back to that need to ask questions, to find meaning and purpose in our lives, which lies at the heart of this ancient faith and which gives Judaism the opportunity to give meaning and relevance to our lives as it has in so many previous generations. Judaism is an engagement in and a commitment to a four thousand year old process that traces its roots back to its very first generation, to the story of Abraham and Sarah as related in the biblical Book of Genesis.

¹ The family meal celebrated on the first night of the festival of *Pesach* (Passover)

² Sabbath: the Jewish Sabbath commences with the lighting of candles at sunset on a Friday

³ Genesis 12 ff

Judaism

Here, in his developing relationship with God, Abraham sets the tone for the experience and the attitude that will shape Judaism for all its future generations. Abraham makes a commitment to the One God, listens to the words of this God (as presented by the biblical author), obeys, challenges and argues with this God. This attitude is exemplified and refined in Abraham's biblical grandson, Jacob, whose name is changed to Israel¹ – which translates as 'he (*or one*) who struggles with God'.

And that is Judaism. It is the result of hundreds of generations of Jews following the examples of their ancestors such as Jacob; struggling with God, seeking answers to those eternal questions about how we should find meaning and purpose in our lives, our relationships with others and with our world. Jewish history is the experience of that struggle; Jewish literature is the record of it. And each generation of the Jewish people adds its own chapter, each individual Jew his or her own story to the heritage, to the process called Judaism.

¹ Genesis 32:29

2

THE JEWISH VIEW OF GOD



*We affirm the Jewish conception of God:
One and indivisible, transcendent and
immanent, Creator and Sustainer of the
universe, Source of the Moral Law, a God
of justice and mercy Who demands that
human beings shall practise justice and
mercy in their dealings with one another.*

At the heart of Judaism is the recognition and acknowledgement of a divine source of power and inspiration, the embodiment and focus of all religious quest: God. The most significant element of the Jewish understanding of God, explicitly declared in the *Sh'ma*, one of the central elements of Jewish liturgy, is the affirmation that there is only one God. This concept, which emerged against a background of the idolatrous worship of many gods, has been a central feature of the Jewish religion since its earliest days. The awareness of an invisible and indivisible divine presence has shaped and sustained Judaism throughout the ages.

Proving God's existence, a favourite pastime of philosophers of all generations, has never been a concern of Judaism's. As the Psalmist wrote 'Only the fool says in his heart "There is no God."'¹ Judaism's attitude to the existence of God, then, is not so much a question of belief as one of awareness. We may, at certain times in our lives feel more or less aware of God's presence, but the starting point for Judaism is that there is a God.

For many, particularly in our modern technological age, this assertion presents a major problem. The feeling is, perhaps, that our ancient ancestors, living in an uncertain world, had a much greater requirement for the belief in the existence of a divine power to explain all those things that they did not understand and to which they could turn in times of danger, need or gratitude. Unlike them, we are generally much better protected from the vicissitudes of nature and have a greater understanding of the workings of the universe. This, coupled with the secular values of the age in which we live and the scepticism born of our rational approach to the world, means that God is far less apparent in our time than was the case in the world of our ancestors. In particular, science has created an environment in which we are unlikely to believe anything to be

¹ Psalm 14:1, 53:1

the case unless it can be proven empirically. This approach, which pervades more of our modern lives than we are perhaps prepared to acknowledge, seems to make belief in God appear irrelevant or anachronistic to many.

In the end, though, human beings can never truly know or define God – such a suggestion is, by its very definition, absurd. This has not, however, prevented Jews, in all ages and from a variety of perspectives, from making statements and assumptions about the nature and the role of God. We cannot know God but we can make certain assertions about God's existence. Already mentioned is the key Jewish belief that there is only one God, a basis from which can be derived other elements of the Jewish conception of the divine power and the universe.

The Jewish belief that there is one God leads to the conclusion that the universe is also a unity and God is its Creator. While Progressive Judaism acknowledges that the six-day creation story in the opening chapter of Genesis is a myth that does not tally with the scientific understanding of our own age that favours the theory of the universe as having started with a 'Big Bang', the suggestion in the creation story, that light suddenly emerged out of darkness, has some parallels with modern cosmology. Ultimately, although science can tell us what happened milliseconds after the Big Bang, it is unable as yet to offer an explanation as to what caused the explosion and – more significantly – why it happened. Such speculation belongs to the sphere of religion, which regards this miracle of creation as being a manifestation of the divine.

Having set in motion whatever were the forces that caused the universe to come into being, God – as their source – also sustains the universe at every moment. This ongoing role of God in organising the natural powers that are present at every level of creation is acknowledged in Jewish liturgy, which

praises God who *m'chadeish b'chol yom tamid ma-aseh v'reishit* – 'You daily renew creation.'¹ This implies the presence of God in the works of nature, the organisation of physical forces that was set in place at the very instant of creation, which can be destructive as well as creative.

We frequently see examples of the destructive potential of nature. Earthquake and tsunami, hurricane, drought and fire are as much a part of the fabric of nature as hot summer days and winter rains. Crippling diseases and horrific cancers exist alongside healthy, fully functioning bodies. Our biblical ancestors believed that their words and offerings could influence the divine power to alter the pattern of nature. In our time, we tend to look upon natural catastrophe or devastating illness as a proof of the non-existence of God when, in fact, they are a manifestation of nature: they occur because destructive forces must necessarily also be present in a system in which creative forces are at work. God's role in such cases is not to intervene and suspend or change the laws of nature but rather to imbue human beings with the capacity to respond to, deal with and try to overcome or protect against their effects. This divinely bestowed human attribute will be considered at greater length in the next chapter.

Such an approach to nature and God's role within it raises problems when one considers the question of miracles. The earliest commentators on the Hebrew Bible were the scholars who began their work of contemplating these texts in the second century before the Common Era.² These commentators were troubled by the events preceding the biblical Exodus, for

¹ *Mishkan T'filah* ('Tabernacle of Prayer), World Union Edition, is the Sabbath and daily prayerbook of Progressive Judaism in our region, as well as an excellent resource for studying Progressive Judaism. This prayer, 'Yotzeir or' is found on p.60 (and in traditional Jewish liturgy)

² Judaism refers to the periods of time commonly known in Western tradition as BC and AD as 'Before the Common Era (BCE) and 'Common Era' (CE) respectively.

example, where God sought to punish the Egyptians for enslaving the Israelites. In order to achieve this, so the biblical text relates, God suspended the natural course of events and introduced a series of apparently supernatural – and very brutal – occurrences that only the Egyptians suffered.¹ The explanation the scholars offered, faced with the ‘biblical fact’ of these miracles, was that God had pre-programmed these events into nature at the moment of creation in order that they would occur at the pre-ordained time. The alternative, namely that God had indeed intervened to alter nature at a specific point in history, raises a simple but inevitable question: if God was able to change nature on that occasion, why have similar interventions not been made at other times of catastrophe, whether in the lives of nations or individuals? A third option, of course, available to us but not to the scholars committed to the literal ‘truth’ of the Torah, is to accept that miracles as intentional ‘acts of God’ simply do not take place; that nature invariably behaves according to the laws of physics. The issue is then how human beings receive and respond to manifestations of nature, which, although they obey the laws of physics, still have the capacity to surprise or even hurt us.

The creative (and sometimes destructive), immensely powerful aspect of God is necessarily and inevitably beyond human power to explain or comprehend. God is, by definition, greater than and separate from the created universe, as well as being present in every aspect of it. Any attempt to describe God will be only that: an attempt, a description of something that cannot fully be described, a vague apprehension of something that cannot fully be comprehended. Nevertheless, human beings, in seeking to describe God, will naturally ascribe to God features with which they are familiar in order to make such descriptions more accessible to listeners and readers, though, as generations of Jewish scholars have been at pains to point out, these are only metaphorical. Anthropomorphisms (references to God as

¹ Exodus chapters 7-14

having human features or characteristics) cannot be taken literally; their role is to help the understanding and appreciation of God. In the end, though, we must accept God's transcendence with the words of the prophet Isaiah: "My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are My ways your ways," says the Eternal One. "For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts."¹

Although Judaism is adamant that God is transcendent and exists within and beyond the universe in ways we cannot explain or understand, it equally emphasises God's immanence: the perception and appreciation of the divine presence that is available to every individual. The seeming contradiction between these two aspects of God is addressed in the hymn *Adon Olam*,² a hymn sung in many synagogue services. It begins by describing how God existed before the universe was created and will continue to exist after it has ended, yet concludes with the words, 'Into Your hands I entrust my spirit, when I sleep and when I wake, and with my spirit my body also; the Eternal One is with me, I shall not fear.' Here we find the basis of the personal relationship that Judaism believes can exist between individuals and God; a closeness experienced by Abraham, Rebekka,³ Jacob and Hannah,⁴ for example, and available to all their descendants.

One aspect of this relationship that Judaism has always emphasised is the nature of the demands that God makes of human beings within that relationship. As well as being the power that organises and sustains the creative forces of the universe, God is the source of that drive within all creation to

¹ Isaiah 55:8f

²World Union Edition of *Mishkan T'filah* p.625

³ See Genesis 25:22-23. There is less recorded in the case of the matriarchs and other women, and consequently less awareness that they too relate directly and personally to God on significant occasions and in pivotal ways.

⁴See 1st Samuel 1:11

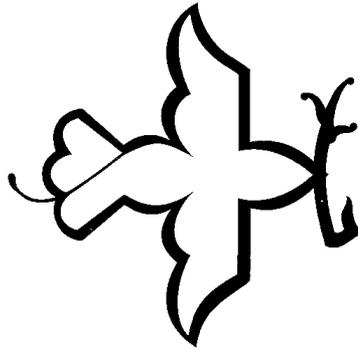
survive and to grow. For human beings, that growth is not just a case of physical development and evolution; it also carries a moral aspect. God is the source of the attributes of justice and mercy that human beings are expected to practise in their dealings with one another.

Before moving to that aspect of the relationship between God and human beings, however, it is necessary to return to a question that was alluded to at the beginning of this chapter. If belief in the existence of God is at the heart of Judaism, how then can those who find themselves unable to believe in God count themselves among its ranks? It would be easy – and perhaps insulting – to suggest that it may be the human inability to comprehend God that lies at the heart of some people’s refusal to recognise or acknowledge a divine presence. But it is hard to deny that there are many aspects of our modern world that might persuade us of the improbability of the existence of a benevolent Creator who seeks to guide and protect us. However, the plea of Progressive Judaism to a person who might be struggling with doubts about the existence of God is that they should persist with the struggle. Just as Abraham and Jacob argued and struggled with God, so too should their descendants continue that process.

Given that one can never truly know or understand God or fathom God’s ways, those who are wrestling with their doubts are likely to have a more meaningful relationship with the divine power than those whose faith is blind and lacks challenge. Progressive Judaism aims to offer a spiritual home to those who are searching for, as well as to those who believe they have found, a meaningful relationship with God – Progressive congregations probably contain many members who consider themselves to be staunch atheists alongside those whose relationship with God may be one of mutual challenge rather than benign acknowledgement. Such a congregation truly reflects Judaism’s attitude towards the Divine.

3

THE JEWISH VIEW OF
HUMANITY



We affirm the Jewish conception of humanity: created in the Divine Image, endowed with free will, capable of sublime goodness but also of terrible evil, mortal yet with a sense of eternity, able to enter into a direct personal relationship with their Creator, and to restore that relationship, when it is broken, through repentance (t'shuvah).

It is a feature of Judaism that its adherents are in a relationship with God, and that this relationship is an ongoing one. Just as Judaism has its understanding of the divine, so too does it offer a definition of humanity. 'Eternal God, what are human beings that you have made us, humankind that you are mindful of us? For you have made human beings little less than divine and crowned us with glory and honour.'¹

These well-known verses from the eighth Psalm confirm the Jewish conception of humanity: that human beings are the pinnacle of God's creation and that we have, in ways that are not clear to us, been created in the divine image. This cannot mean, of course, that we look like God; rather that there is, implanted within us in some mysterious and intangible way, a spark of the divine and the possibility of our establishing and maintaining a connection to it. This awareness of God within us is something we can acknowledge or ignore; it is always there but recognition of it varies from individual to individual, from generation to generation, according to situation or circumstance.

This emphasises one of the most important elements of the Jewish understanding of humanity: the fact that we have been given free will. Our ability to decide our own actions - and by extension to carry responsibility for them and their consequences - is the basis of our evolution and development. Without that capacity, humanity would never have embarked upon its journey from prehistoric ignorance to uncover the potential upon which our present society has been built and towards the fulfilment of which it is still journeying.

Of course, the development of that human society has come at a price. The cost of free will is the potential to destroy as well as to create, to demonstrate cruelty and hatred as well as love and compassion. According to the Rabbis, every human being is

¹ Psalm 8: 4-5

endowed with a good inclination and an evil inclination (*yeitzer ha-tov* and *yeitzer ha-ra*) – forces within us that vie at all times for our allegiance. There is merit in both. The Rabbis assert that if it were not for the evil inclination, people would not have sufficient determination to build a house or demonstrate any ambition whatsoever.¹ It is also the source of human creativity. Judaism is convinced that our natural human inclination is towards the good and the positive, despite the countless bloody events in history that stand as proof of our regular failure to choose good over evil.

This is the consequence of free will – and occasionally the devastating and destructive manifestations of humanity's will might cause us to question the very existence of God. How can God permit human beings to behave with such callous cruelty and neglect towards fellow human beings? The answer lies in our understanding of God. As has already been suggested², God cannot interfere with or alter manifestations of nature, having established the universe according to a particular set of physical laws. The same applies to human nature. Having implanted free will within us, God must leave us to respond to that ability to choose.

Of course, God can influence our choices. That is the nature of the divinely inspired potential that has been implanted within us. God has given us the freedom to choose but wishes us to follow our good inclination. Human beings have an innate awareness of right and wrong; it is upon this awareness that the potential for human development and progress is based. We have, sadly, all experienced tragedy and injustice in our lives and, thanks to modern technology, we now have the ability to see into remote and strife-torn areas of the world, exposing us to more images of suffering and misery inflicted by nature and human beings than any previous generation. Although this

¹ *Midrash Genesis Rabbah* 9:7

² See p.12

may deaden our senses, charitable and humanitarian responses to global tragedies suggest that the natural human instinct is to do what we can to assist people in desperate need. There is within us an ability to empathise with the suffering of fellow human beings and a desire, welling from somewhere deep inside us, to do whatever we can to help. This is a manifestation of the Divine within us, that sense of responsibility and duty towards our fellows and a wish to give assistance and support in times of suffering. No-one can say from where this wellspring of compassion draws its source. All we can do is acknowledge it as God-given, recognise it as being part of our human duty and respond to it accordingly with acts of kindness and love.

This exposure to human suffering all around the globe reminds us constantly of our own mortality. This recognition that we are on this earth for only a brief span can encourage our *yeitzer ha-ra* and make us selfish, determined simply to attend to our own needs. As indicated above, a degree of self-interest is necessary for individual survival and improvement. However, set against this is a sense of eternity, an inexplicable awareness that whatever we give to life does not come to an end when we depart from the planet and that whatever good we bring into the world does not perish.

It is one of the paradoxes of God that the divine presence can be perceived both as an indescribable, impenetrable force that transcends the universe and as an immanent personal presence with whom it is possible to have an individual relationship. Such a relationship is not experienced by all human beings, but those who are able to establish such a connection with the Divine find that their lives can be enriched in ways not immediately apparent to those for whom no such connection exists.

Judaism has always emphasised the possibility of such a relationship with God, however God may be perceived or understood by an individual. This awareness of the divine presence should encourage a person to choose good over evil, to follow the correct path – the path that is dictated by one’s *yeitzer ha-tov*. Human fallibility means that this is not always possible, but Judaism affirms the capacity of human beings to recognise their own failings and, moreover, to perceive this recognition as an apprehension of God, whether working within them as a manifestation of conscience or as an external force.

This recognition of human failing and the desire to correct it is known as *t’shuvoah*. This is usually translated as ‘repentance’ but has more to do with returning, finding one’s way back to the right path. So convinced is Judaism of the possibility – and necessity – of correcting one’s failings and so repairing one’s relationship with the Divine, that an annual period of time, culminating in the Day of Atonement, is set aside for this to be considered and attempted.¹ *T’shuvoah* can be made at any time, however, whenever human beings recognise their failings and seek to atone for them. This possibility, to correct the imbalance between the evil and good inclinations, is built into every individual. Ultimately, this ensures that a humanity that has been given free will can, despite its many terrible failings, make progress towards fulfilling the divine potential that has been implanted within it, and thereby work to bring goodness into the world.

¹ See chapter 19, ‘The Days of Awe’.

4

THE JEWISH VIEW OF HUMAN HISTORY



We affirm the Jewish conception of human history: a drama of progress and setback, triumph and tragedy, yet divinely destined to lead to an age when all worship the One God, good will triumph over evil, and the reign of freedom, justice, love and peace will be permanently established throughout the world.

Although accounts of human development in the Bible can hardly be described as historically accurate (and nor were they really intended to be), what they do demonstrate is that their authors were keenly aware of humanity's failings as well as its capacity for good.

The biblical book of Genesis opens with an account of the beginning of the world and by the time we are a quarter of the way through the eleventh chapter, we have seen deception and murder, wickedness and arrogance. This culminates in God disposing of human beings with the Flood and then confounding their attempt at building a tower to reach the sky by causing them to speak a variety of languages: not a particularly auspicious beginning for a species that, as noted in the previous chapter, has been created in the divine image.

But these stories in the early part of Genesis are seeking to depict and explain aspects of human life rather than represent factual historical experience. They demonstrate to us the wisdom and insight of our ancient ancestors: their authors were no less aware than are we of the shortcomings of humankind, and they felt compelled to write stories depicting those shortcomings. But the accounts of such failings tell only half the story of humanity. Perhaps the most intriguing of the early legends in Genesis is the story of the Tower of Babel in chapter eleven. Although its purpose was presumably to explain why different cultures speaking different languages existed in the Ancient Near East, the idea that God should deliberately seek to confuse human beings and create obstacles that prevent them from communicating with one another tends to fly in the face of what Judaism perceives as humanity's task. If the process and progress of human history is meant to be humanity's journey towards self-awareness and self-fulfilment, then the theology behind the story of the Tower of Babel either represents a cruel divine joke or a desire by the divine power to make humanity's task all the more difficult. Or perhaps, as the story in Genesis

itself suggests, it was the motivation behind the construction of the Tower of Babel that was the problem: human co-operation in this venture was based upon arrogance rather than a desire to work in partnership with God.

The emergence of different cultures – more numerous than the author of Genesis 11:1-9 could have imagined – coupled with human arrogance has meant that humanity's journey in search of that mythical level of co-operation has been long and painful, but also one of enormous progress. Mighty empires have come and gone, often leaving devastation in their wake, but also testimonies to the human ability to build societies of great complexity, as reflected in the archaeology, art and literature they produced. Every successful empire, however flawed may have been its philosophy, however misguided and brutal its efforts to impose its will upon others and however vociferous the opposition to it and how undignified its ultimate collapse, has made a contribution to history and to the progress of humanity.

The modern world in which we live, for all its glaring faults, owes immeasurable gratitude to the efforts of past generations. In the past two centuries, revolutions in scientific knowledge and its technological application have ensured that, for many, life today is more sophisticated and structured, better protected from nature and disease and better understood than has ever been the case in the past. These developments show humanity's progress from its earliest days of uncertainty and superstition.

But the task is not complete and nor has the journey been one of uninterrupted progress. The human failings highlighted in those early chapters of Genesis have manifested themselves with horrific consequences at frequent intervals in human history. Arrogance has led one society or culture to imagine itself superior to another and to seek to impose its will over its rivals, developing ever more sophisticated methods of killing

fellow human beings to impose and enforce that will. These human tendencies ensure that we cannot deny the reality of the human potential to do evil and to wreak havoc as well as to create and to build.

At the risk of appearing to emphasise a particularly Jewish perspective on history, perhaps the best modern example of this contrast in human history and development is nineteenth and early twentieth century Germany. The cultural developments in so many different scientific and artistic fields in Germany during the nineteenth century - not least among them the emergence of the modern version of our ancient faith that underpins Progressive Judaism - were immense. Yet this cultured society was the breeding ground for the horrors of the Holocaust, one of the most chilling examples of how humanity's technological developments have been used to bring destruction to other human beings. Of course, there are many other examples of human cruelty. Our age has witnessed genocide in Rwanda and ethnic cleansing in the Balkan states, while the development of weapons of mass destruction casts a chilling shadow over the new millennium as divisions between cultures emerge and peoples continue to confront each other with hostility and loathing.

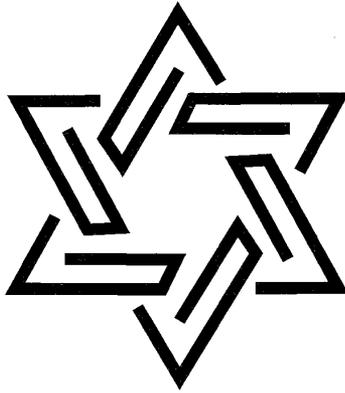
But Judaism firmly believes - as all religions surely should - that humanity's journey from its earliest days is one which leads inexorably, if somewhat haltingly, towards a time when such mutual mistrust and its consequences will lie in the past. No matter how much evidence may suggest that human beings are destined always to confront one another with hostility, there are also enough examples in human history to suggest the development of a maturity that will eventually triumph. We live in a world more aware of itself - its diversity, its shortcomings and its potential - than has ever been the case before. This is the consequence of human development, the unfolding of history as it continues its journey towards a

A Judaism for the Twenty-First Century

recognition and realisation of humanity's destiny: to live in harmony with itself, its world and its Creator. Judaism is committed to playing its part in mapping out the path and encouraging its adherents to make that journey, along with the rest of humankind.

6

THE JEWISH PEOPLE



We affirm our commitment to the Jewish People, bearer of the Jewish religious and cultural heritage, and our duty to defend the civil rights, and to seek the material and spiritual welfare, of Jews and Jewish communities everywhere.

It is an awareness of and a commitment to that covenant of more than three thousand years ago that has shaped the Jewish people. The question still remains, however: who or what, exactly, are the Jewish people? This is not a question about Jewish status - an important issue in Judaism, to be sure - but this question is more abstract. It is an attempt to define what it is that links the Jewish people; what it is that, in the words of one of the readings in the prayer book, '...unites and sanctifies the House of Israel in all lands and ages.'¹

It is significant, perhaps, that the reading from which these words are taken is one that precedes the lighting of the candles to welcome Shabbat. The Sabbath is an extraordinary and unique institution, one of the things that has indeed held the Jewish people together 'in all lands and ages' but Sabbath observance is not, in the end, the measure of what constitutes membership of the Jewish people.

The fact that there have been Jews 'in all lands and ages' also gives the lie to a misguided and now out-dated theory, propounded as scientific 'fact' by those whose motives may be somewhat suspect, that the Jewish people are a 'race'. The geographic and cultural diversity among Jews around the world mean that there are, in addition to the English-speaking Jews of Australasia, the UK, the USA and other countries with which we are most familiar, Indian Jews and Chinese Jews, South American Jews and black African Jews - each with their own histories and cultural traditions that owe as much to their geographical location as they do to their Jewish roots.

Of course, there are areas where the Jews are particularly concentrated - this is especially true of the more Orthodox branches of Judaism where geographical proximity to the

¹ *World Union Edition of Mishkan T'filah* p.119. House of Israel here means 'The Jewish people' and Israel is often used in the prayer book in this way, as in '*Sh'ma Yisrael*, Hear, O Israel', or colloquially, 'Listen, you Jewish people'.

centres of the community is important. But within Progressive Judaism in our region, for example, there are communities in areas in which there is no major Jewish presence such as Hobart or Dunedin, and efforts are made to encourage Jews in such locations to find their place in the Jewish community.

Moreover, in areas such as Eastern Europe, Judaism is currently enjoying a renaissance. With the collapse of the Soviet Union and the lifting of the 'Iron Curtain', the new freedom has permitted large numbers of people to attempt to re-engage (or engage for the first time) with a Jewish heritage that for so many was little more than a memory or a rumour. Significant numbers of these Jews have now left the former Soviet Union and have made new lives for themselves as Jews in Israel or, somewhat ironically perhaps, in Germany. Many well-established congregations in Europe, the United States and elsewhere have developed links with emerging communities in eastern European countries such as Poland or Ukraine. Such links are intended to offer support and encouragement to these new congregations; they also provide a telling example of the connections and shared destiny of Jews all over the world.

The bond that joins the Jewish people together is one that transcends time as well as space. For not only are there Jews in the remotest corners of the world, so too have there been Jews in numerous locations throughout history. The historical, as well as the geographical, connections are also acknowledged in various ways in Jewish communities today.

During the Second World War, when the Nazis rounded up all the Jews in Bohemia and Moravia, the religious artefacts were taken from the synagogues and placed in a large warehouse, even as the Jews themselves were taken to Terezin¹ and then on

¹ A concentration camp 30 miles north of Prague. Here the Nazis sought to demonstrate a 'normal' way of life for the Jews, chiefly for the benefit of a

to Auschwitz. The origin of every item was carefully documented; the intention being to establish in Prague what Hitler apparently described as a 'Museum of an Extinct Culture'.

After the War, these items – Torah scrolls, the silver bells, breastplates and pointers and elaborately embroidered covers – remained in the warehouse under Soviet rule. But a Rabbi of Czech origin, Rabbi Harold Reinhardt, who was based at the Westminster Synagogue in London, knew of the existence of this warehouse and its contents. After lengthy negotiations with the Czech authorities, and the contribution of a generous benefactor, the scrolls were released and in 1964 were despatched to London. There were over 1,500 of them – some in good condition, many torn, burnt or otherwise damaged. Over the years, these scrolls have been repaired and many of them are in use in congregations all over the world. Because of the careful documentation and record keeping, the origin of each scroll is known and so a living link with communities that were wiped out during World War Two is maintained in thriving Jewish communities the world over.

This is living proof that there is an invisible yet undeniable global link between all Jews, regardless of their race or ethnic origin, appearance or national culture. Perhaps a final example of this link can be found in the following reality of Jewish life. Many synagogues are not large enough to contain the entire membership of their particular congregation. This is not usually a problem since even in a thriving congregation the average attendance at regular Sabbath services – and most festival services – may be only a minority of the total membership. But on the High Holydays – *Rosh ha-Shanah* and *Yom Kippur* – larger venues need to be hired or marquees added

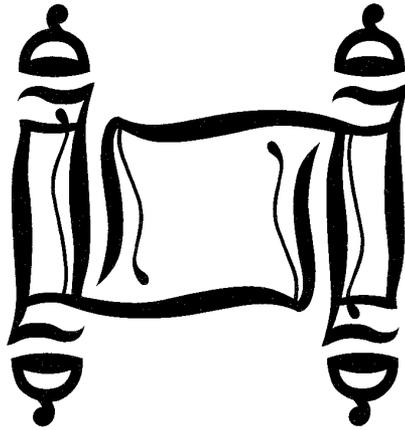
visiting Red Cross delegation, while continuing to despatch inmates to the extermination camp at Auschwitz in neighbouring Poland.

to existing buildings in order to accommodate the vast turnout of Jews who, for the rest of the year, have little or no contact with their synagogue. There is something that calls to all Jews at key moments of the year – and of their lives – and reminds them of their undeniable association with the Jewish people, its history and its destiny. This connection is encapsulated in the rabbinic dictum *kol Yisra'el aravin zeh ba-zeh*: 'All of Israel are sureties for one another.'¹

¹ Talmud *Shevu'ot* 39a

10

TORAH (‘TEACHING’)



We affirm the Jewish conception of Torah (“Teaching”): that at Mount Sinai as well as subsequently, through revelation and inspiration, reflection and discussion, our people gained an ever growing understanding of God’s will, and that this is a continuing process.

Torah is at the heart of Jewish literature – and indeed the whole of the quest we call Judaism. There are one or two popular misconceptions about this word that need to be clarified. These relate to the meaning, use and translation of the word 'Torah'.

Firstly, it is important to understand what is being talked about when the word Torah is mentioned. In its narrowest sense, it refers to the written text of the Five Books of Moses, the first five books of the Bible. In Jewish tradition, these are contained in a scroll from which a section is read every week in synagogue. This scroll is referred to as 'the Torah', often translated as 'the Law'; a definition that is not strictly accurate even with regard to the contents of the Five Books of Moses and that completely fails to convey the weight and significance of the word in Jewish tradition.

The word 'Torah' derives from a Hebrew root that means 'teaching'. In its broadest sense, then, Torah can be said to describe the development of human understanding of the divine will. More specifically, however, the Five Books of Moses are referred to in Judaism as the 'written Torah' – the text from which subsequent teaching and tradition derives. According to Orthodox Jewish tradition, the written Torah – that is, the five books of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy – were either written or dictated by God at the encounter at Mount Sinai¹ and represent immutable divine truth. Opinions of the source of these texts vary greatly² but one thing is clear: these five books contain much more than merely a list of rules and instructions as the partial translation 'the Law' suggests.

We cannot say for certain what occurred at Mount Sinai. In the end, what matters even more than what actually happened is the effect of this encounter between the human and the Divine

¹ Exodus 19 ff., see p.24

² See chapter 28

and the ensuing tradition that every Jew was, in some mystical way, present at Mount Sinai.¹

This serves to illustrate both the nature of the Jewish approach to Torah and to highlight a particular Progressive attitude to it. Since, from a traditional point of view, the Torah is regarded as having divine authorship, every verse, every word, every repetition or omission has a significance that allows for interpretation and elaboration. For most Orthodox biblical scholars, such interpretations were already intended by the divine author of the text as received by Moses; they were simply waiting for a future time when their significance would be understood.

Whereas an Orthodox approach would say that the Torah contains all possible interpretations and is indisputably true, a Progressive view would regard the Torah as a part of the process of the human endeavour to discover truth: a product of that search at a particular point of the journey rather than the final word.

Such a perspective on the written Torah is known as 'Progressive Revelation'. Put simply, this view of the relationship between humanity and the Creator is one in which humanity's appreciation develops gradually, according to our human ability to understand our world and our place in it. As we read in our prayer book; 'Sinai was only the beginning. The Torah has never ceased to grow. In every age it has been refined and enlarged. It has a permanent core and an expanding periphery. It expands as the horizon of human vision grows.'²

¹ See p.29 This is even understood to extend to those who join the Jewish people: *Talmud* - Shavuot 39a

² World Union Edition of *Mishkan T'filah*, p.399

This is 'Torah' in its truest sense – a process of learning and understanding that is at the heart of Judaism.

The ancient Rabbis were aware of this; their concept of 'oral Torah'¹ acknowledged that certain aspects of human life – and the role of God within it – would only be perceived once human beings had achieved sufficient insight and knowledge. They recognised too that regulations and decisions based on the teachings of Torah should always reflect and be shaped by the environment in which its adherents found themselves. To this must be added, however, their belief that such adaptations were somehow built into the fabric of Torah itself by a divine author who anticipated the particular circumstances that would require these adaptations. Thus the Rabbis were able to sustain their belief in the divine authorship of the Torah and still make changes to it. Progressive Judaism sees itself as inheriting this mantle, understanding Torah using modern scholarship; but it has liberated itself from the restriction of believing in the divine authorship of the Five Books of Moses. It recognises instead that every step in this ongoing and holy process is, in fact, a human endeavour'; to try to determine for our own time 'What does God want of us?

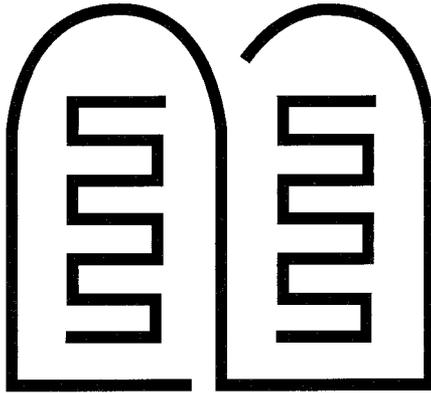
We engage in that process through revelation and study, reflection and discussion, adding our own insights and those of our age to those of the generations of Jews who have come before us. We have an understanding of the world that is radically different to that of, say, the author of the creation story in the opening chapter of the Book of Genesis. While our scientific awareness of the origins of our planet and its place in the universe is very different from that of the biblical writer, the first chapter of Genesis still offers a view of the world that gives

¹ Oral Torah refers to the wealth of rabbinic opinion based on the Torah (and other biblical literature) which was distinct from the written Torah – the Five Books of Moses. The oral Torah could not be written down as it might be seen to challenge the supreme authority of the written Torah. See p.54

humans a particular place in the scheme of things and puts forward the idea of a Creator, and the connection between the Creator and the creation. In short, then, it could be said that while our scientific knowledge gives us insight as to how life started, the questions addressed in the Genesis creation story are intended to help us understand the meaning and purpose of human existence.

Such an understanding, such a fusion of modern knowledge with the teachings and insights of previous scholars and sages, whose search for truth was no less valid or earnest than our own, describes and defines Progressive Revelation. It demonstrates the true nature of Torah: an ongoing process of learning and understanding, of teaching and awareness that in turn, if properly understood and applied, serves to bring us closer to an understanding of our Creator and the will of that Creator for the life of humankind.

THE DIVERSITY OF JEWISH TRADITION



Judaism has never been monolithic. There have always been varieties of Judaism. The more conservative Sadducees and the more progressive Pharisees represent only one of many past conflicts. We affirm the diversity of our tradition.

One of the inevitable consequences of Judaism's developing character has been disagreement among Jews regarding the way in which their religion should grow. The internal debate within Judaism has been reflected in the number of variations in its expression, many of which have shown a keen rivalry that occasionally developed into outright hostility. There is a well-known observation that wherever there are two Jews, there will be three opinions. This implies - correctly - that there have always been varieties of Judaism and, invariably, rivalries between groups that existed contemporaneously.

The political division in biblical times between the kingdoms of Israel and Judah was an early forerunner of the rivalry between the Pharisees and the Sadducees at the time when the Second Temple stood. These rivals were divided along quite clear political and religious lines. The Sadducees were the priestly party, responsible for overseeing sacrifices in the Temple. They formed an elite, almost aristocratic, ruling group in the first century before and after the Common Era, until, of course, the Temple was destroyed, and with it their purpose, role and responsibilities. The Pharisees were more representative of the ordinary people of Judea among whom they lived and worked. But even they did not command the full loyalty of the Jewish people at the time of Roman oppression. Other political groups - militaristic and messianic (or both!) - vied for the loyalty of the Jews and the emergence of the Pharisees as the most influential group was as much due to the Romans eradicating other opposition (such as the Zealots who perished at Masada in 73 CE) as it was to their particular philosophy.

Even within the ranks of the Pharisees, there were divisions. As the Pharisaic tradition developed and its scholars and teachers, the Rabbis, began to interpret the instructions in the Torah, differences of opinion emerged. In the first century BCE, there were two schools of learning: the school of Hillel and the school of Shammai. The schools of these two teachers seemed

to offer variant opinions on just about every aspect of Jewish tradition. In general, the opinions of the school of Hillel tended to be the more liberal and lenient and Hillel's opinions are almost always the ones adopted by subsequent rabbinic tradition.

Although rabbinic tradition became the dominant feature in Judaism, with the emergence of the Talmud as the focal point of its development, there was some significant opposition. During the ninth century CE, different groups arose that denied the authenticity of oral Torah. These sects came to be known as Karaites (literally, 'people of the scripture'), and they were distinguished from the followers of Rabbinical Judaism.

The Karaites believed in strict adherence to the literal text of the scripture, without rabbinical interpretation. They did not accept that rabbinical law was part of an oral tradition that had been handed down from God, or even inspired by God; they believed it was newly created by the sages. The Karaites therefore believed that rabbinic teachings were subject to the flaws of any document written by mere mortals.

The difference between Rabbinic Judaism and Karaism that is most commonly noted is in regard to Shabbat: the Karaites recognised that the Bible specifically prohibits lighting a flame on Shabbat, so they kept their houses dark on Shabbat. Rabbinic Judaism, on the other hand, relied upon rabbinical interpretation that allowed people to leave burning a flame that was lit before Shabbat. Karaites also prohibited sexual intercourse on Shabbat, while the Rabbis considered Shabbat to be the most favourable time for it. The Karaites also followed a slightly different calendar from that established by the Rabbis. According to the Karaites themselves, this movement at one time attracted as much as forty per cent of the Jewish people. Today, Karaites are a very small minority, and most Jews do

not even know that they exist, though they may have heard of their annual Pesach sacrifice on Mount Gerizim in Israel.

Many of the divisions within Judaism were on ideological or theological lines but there were also geographical issues. As Judaism spread into numerous countries, its adherents began to adopt and absorb various elements of the cultures in which they found themselves. As the centuries passed, marked differences arose between those Jews whose base was central and later eastern Europe, and those whose Judaism developed in communities on the Mediterranean coast, particularly in Spain and North Africa. These two groups, *Ashkenazim* and *Sephardim*,¹ developed distinctive customs and practices, as well as linguistic variations. In addition to developing their own everyday language – Yiddish (a mixture of Hebrew and German) for the *Ashkenazim* and Ladino (a mixture of Hebrew and Spanish) for the *Sephardim* – the two groups also developed two variant pronunciations of Hebrew. Differences can be noted in the word for the Sabbath bread, for example, the *Sephardi* pronunciation of which is *challah* (the first ‘a’ sounding like the ‘a’ in father) whereas the *Ashkenazi* usage gives us *chollah* (the ‘o’ as in hot). Indeed, the word for Sabbath itself demonstrates another key difference: generally known as Shabbat, in *Ashkenazi* tradition it is pronounced *Shobbes*. Today the *Sephardi* pronunciation of Hebrew has come to be accepted as the standard and is used by all speakers of modern Hebrew (*Ivrit*) and is used in Progressive synagogues. Nevertheless, the *Ashkenazi* pronunciation still prevails in those circles whose institutions trace their roots to the central and eastern European areas from which this variation emerged.²

¹ For the origins and definitions of these titles, see bottom of p. 57

² Another distinction between *Ashkenazim* and *Sephardim* is a dietary one regarding foods permitted at *Pesach*. Orthodox *Askenazi* Jews do not eat legumes (*kitniyyot*) such as rice or peas at this festival though they may be included in the meals of *Sephardi* Jews during Passover.

Another distinct group of Jews that emerged from this location is known by the collective term of *Chasidim*. This branch of Judaism was, surprisingly, the reforming movement of its time when, in seventeenth century Poland, its founder, the *Ba'al Shem Tov*,¹ sought to reclaim Judaism from what he regarded as the ivory tower of scholarship to which learned Talmudists had taken it and give it back to the people as an expression of hope and joy. Those who opposed this novel movement were called, somewhat unoriginally, *Mitnagdim* (which means 'opponents') but they were unable to stop this novel form of Judaism spreading rapidly through the impoverished peasant communities of Polish Jews. Needless to say, variations of *Chasidism* then emerged, based largely upon the teachings of individual *Chasidic Rebbes*² whose followers often believed them to be endowed with mystical powers and therefore superior to other neighbouring *Chasidic Rebbes*. A number of these different *Chasidic* sects still exist today in major Jewish centres such as New York, Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, as well as in areas of London, Manchester and Gateshead in the UK. With their insistence on wearing seventeenth century Polish costume, they are now generally regarded as the 'ultra-Orthodox' representatives of Jewish tradition. The fact that many of these different sects show distinct hostility towards each other should not come as a great surprise, given the history of divisions in Judaism covered thus far.

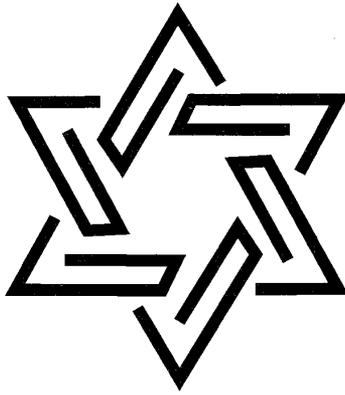
This brief exploration of some of the numerous occasions in Jewish history when there have been different groupings within Judaism should make clear the fact that this is not a monolithic tradition. One might wonder how, with so much internal dispute, Judaism has managed to survive for so many thousands of years. The answer is that it is precisely these

¹ The name given to Rabbi Israel ben Eliezer, meaning 'Master of the Good Name'.

² *Rebbe* is a distorted *Ashkenazi* pronunciation of Rabbi, a title applied to *Chasidic* teachers

differences in belief and practice, interpretation and application that have ensured that survival. The creativity and dynamism that is generated by this diversity within Judaism has been a driving force in ensuring that this religion has never become so fixed that it was unable to progress. It is the long-standing tradition within Judaism of discussion and debate – and, inevitably, disagreement and dispute – which has allowed it to flourish in so many ways and to ensure that it remains relevant and meaningful in the lives of its adherents, whichever part of it they may adhere to.

RESPECT FOR CONSCIENTIOUS OPTIONS



The Emancipation wrought far-reaching changes in Jewish life. It raised fundamental questions about Jewish belief and practice, and about the perpetuation of Judaism, and the resultant debate produced a multiplicity of options. We affirm the respect due to all conscientious options.

For the Jewish people in the Diaspora following the destruction of the Temple, history, for the most part, recorded a troubling and troubled experience. The suspicion and hostility with which one group of human beings tends to regard a group with differing origins or practices was frequently and often violently directed at the Jews of Europe. The roots and expression of European anti-Semitism have been detailed elsewhere.¹ Sadly, hostility to Jews appears still to be part of the European landscape. Nevertheless, the conditions in which the Jews live at the beginning of the twenty-first century are radically different from the ghettoised existence that prevailed for the majority of them little more than two centuries ago. This transformation stems from far-reaching intellectual, social and political changes in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries – beginning with the period that historians term the Age of Enlightenment. For the Jews, the main practical consequence of this development was the removal of many restrictions that had for so long kept them behind ghetto walls and so is referred to in Jewish history as the Emancipation.

Broadly, this period saw the development of an intellectual culture in Western Europe (particularly France, Britain and Germany) where many of the beliefs that had underpinned the old order for centuries were increasingly subjected to the critical scrutiny of reason. This new, enlightened approach had a profound impact on the Jews. At the heart of the *Haskalah* (as the Enlightenment was called in Hebrew), was Moses Mendelssohn (1729-86), a German Jew who, having found work with a silk merchant in Berlin, became one of the greatest figures of the German enlightenment. Mendelssohn was prominent in Berlin's intellectual circles and is widely believed to be the inspiration behind Gotthold Lessing's play *Nathan der Weise* ('Nathan the Wise,' 1779), the hero of which is a Jewish intellectual. Mendelssohn's contribution to the *Haskalah* was to provide a bridge between German and Jewish culture in one of

¹ See page 140

the centres of Western European civilisation, most notably with his translation (1780-83) of the Pentateuch into German¹.

The effects of the Enlightenment on the Jewish communities of Europe varied. With the emergence of international banking, Jews found themselves in places of prominence in the Netherlands and many German states, for example. As an emerging middle class with valuable financial skills, Jews were once again seen as useful to their hosts, but they were also regarded with some suspicion because of their religion. For many Jews, the solution was simple: the best way fully to assimilate was to convert to Christianity and be rid of the limitations placed upon Jews. A well-known view, usually attributed to Moses Mendelssohn, was that it was possible to be 'fully German on the street, fully Jewish at home'. Nevertheless, the extent to which Jews were accepted varied from one European country to another, and from one period to another. Despite Mendelssohn's assertion, the pressure on the Jews to abandon their heritage in such an environment was one of the major issues that confronted the Jewish community at the start of the nineteenth century.

For the vast majority of Jews, however, there was no positive interaction between their community and the wider Christian society among whom – and yet apart from whom – they made their homes. This was particularly true in central and eastern Europe. The culture within the ghetto was exclusively Jewish. Family and communal life was rigidly structured. Girls were trained by their mothers to keep a Jewish home and were prepared to be married off to suitable husbands while boys were trained in studies that were exclusively Jewish before either going on to higher education to study Talmud at a

¹ The German text was written, in accordance with the custom that prevailed among German Jews, in Hebrew characters, and the commentary, *Biur*, in Hebrew.

*yeshivah*¹ or taking up their father's trade and waiting for their marriage to be arranged. The language of prayer was Hebrew; the language of everyday was Yiddish. This insular, self-contained society was the norm for generations of Jews up until the turn of the nineteenth century. This is not to say, of course, that the outside world did not impinge upon the Jews in the ghetto; many were the instances of anti-Semitic pogroms, and their murderous consequences for the Jews gave little indication of a change in the way the world regarded them. So Judaism for the most part continued to tread a familiar path within its ghetto environment, the certainty of its beliefs and practices unimpeded and unchallenged by the outside world.

In the enlightened lands of Western Europe, the Emancipation swept this certainty away with such force that the shock waves are still being felt two centuries later as Judaism tries to come to terms with the changes it made possible. So swift were those changes, so manifold those possibilities, that grandparents living in the Jewish section of a village in Germany in the early nineteenth century whose daily language was Yiddish, whose education had been exclusively on matters Jewish and who had lived all their lives without ever leaving that village could have grandchildren who lived in large German cities like Hamburg or Berlin, spoke German, studied a range of subjects at university and enjoyed the bourgeois lifestyle of nineteenth century western Europe.

The effects of the Enlightenment continued to be felt in the nineteenth century. With the coming of the industrial and scientific revolutions, economic changes provided entrepreneurial or professional Jews with the opportunity to benefit. Intellectual upheavals played their part in bringing about a major change in the way that Judaism and other religions viewed themselves and their traditions. The divine authorship of sacred scriptures was called into question and

¹ Academy for Jewish study.

their very credibility was challenged by scientific exploration and discovery – most notably the publication in 1859 of Darwin’s ‘Theory of Evolution’ and by novel textual criticism of the Bible by German Christian scholars Karl Heinrich Graf (1815-1869) and Julius Wellhausen (1844-1918).¹

These changes presented so many challenges to Judaism that it is hardly surprising that a variety of responses to them emerged, each seeking in its own way to preserve the heritage of Judaism in a new and strange environment. This change in circumstances was no less profound – and no less threatening – to the survival of Judaism than the one it had faced when the Romans had destroyed the Temple. Judaism’s ability to adapt to its environment, its tradition of discussion and debate that had, on so many occasions in the past, allowed it to develop, and its ability to contain a diversity of opinion – all these ensured that it would survive this latest encounter with the wider world.

Some elements within Judaism would seek to maintain as much of its original form as was possible or practical in this new cultural, social and economic order. Others would eventually find their solution in working towards the establishment of a national homeland in an era where the nation state emerged as the dominant political structure in Europe. Many Jews would abandon their Judaism altogether, preferring to divest themselves of what they saw as an archaic and irrelevant burden in their desire to assimilate into the new society that seemed so keen to welcome them to its ranks. Those who followed this route often converted to Christianity to assist their progress. Others would struggle, as Jews had done in so many previous times and places, to find a synthesis between the demands of Judaism and the wider culture in which they were educated, lived and worked, seeking to meet the challenges of the modern world.

¹ See chapter 28

Each of these options represented and represents still a valid attempt to keep Judaism alive in an age where rapid change often threatened to sweep it away. One such option, Progressive Judaism, recognises that the challenges arising with the Emancipation made many choices possible. This tradition of diversity within Judaism is, as has already been suggested, part of what allows Judaism to respond constructively and creatively to changes in its environment.

One of the values encouraged by the Emancipation was that of tolerance of individuals and groups holding different opinions. It is a sad fact that the most bitter arguments seem to take place among different groups professing to represent the same faith or creed. By definition, the more progressive branches of Judaism respect this divergence of opinion within our ancient heritage, a respect that is not always reciprocated. It is to the emergence of this Progressive Judaism, and the balance it tried to establish and maintain, that our attention now turns.