

REVIEW ARTICLE:

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One of the major problems facing Jewish thinkers today is how to make Judaism, its doctrines, insights, and practices, relevant to the modern man. On the one hand we face the prospect of appearing irrelevant and hence of no significance to contemporary man; on the other hand, there is the equally unappealing alternative of such radical modification and transvaluation of authentic Judaism, for the purpose of appearing philosophically "up to date," that we are no longer left with the genuine Jewish tradition and judgment. This is the problem our reviewer, Rabbi Howard I. Levine, analyzes on the basis of a recent work purporting to formulate a faith for contemporary man. Rabbi Levine, who teaches at Teachers Institute and Stern College for Women of Yeshiva University, is the author of "The Non-Observant Orthodox" in the Fall 1959 issue of *TRADITION*. He has recently received his Ph.D. degree in Talmud from Yeshiva's Bernard Revel Graduate School.

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Religion today finds itself in a paradoxical situation. On the one hand, there is a marked revival of interest in religion and increasing institutional affiliation. On the other hand, the inroads of secularism into religious life are rapidly becoming more pronounced. The return to religion is not without a price. Religion has to contend with secularist threats not only from without, but also from within. It has to prove the validity of its message

to a largely uncommitted membership, very often even to callous and cynical minds. It therefore has to speak very much in the vernacular of modern man.

This phenomenon has both beneficial and harmful aspects. On the positive side, religion today strives to be more relevant to the total needs of contemporary man and tends to broaden its scope and activity. However, this very often leads to negative feature in re-

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ligion: that of accommodating itself too readily to outside pressures, with the consequent loss of its inner direction and substance. Religion then becomes the servant of modern man instead of his guide and religious thought becomes subservient to modern secular conceptions instead of their antidote. Needless to say, Jewish religion today is not exempt from this challenge.

In face of the challenge of modernism, there are, basically, three alternatives from which we may choose:

1. To accept the modernist outlook as the basic point of view and to incorporate in it as much Jewish content and thought as can be fitted into this basic framework.

2. The converse of this: that is, to accept the traditional Jewish outlook as the basic point of view and to incorporate within it as much of the modern outlook as can be fitted into this basic framework.

3. To accept both the modernist and traditionalist positions as basic and, on points of conflict, to work out some compromise solution through some stretching and pulling at both ends.

The first two alternatives are relatively clear-cut and need not engage our attention for the present. The third alternative, however, is much more exciting and perilous and involves one in many interesting and difficult problems.

It is our purpose to investigate this third position specifically as it is exemplified by the book *A Faith for Moderns*,* by Dr. Robert Gor-

dis who, in addition to his career in the active Conservative rabbinate, has broad academic experience as professor of Bible at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America and adjunct professor of religion at Columbia University.

This is a work that departs from current theological fashion in that it emphasizes the role of reason in religion. The author describes himself as "one who believes that there is no necessary conflict between the heart and the mind, between faith and reason, between tradition and truth." Prof. Gordis writes in an interesting style that engages the attention of the reader, and brings to his subject — which includes the entire range of fundamental religious beliefs — a wide knowledge of Judaism and world religions, as well as a broad awareness of the various intellectual currents and disciplines that make up our Western cultural heritage.

Despite the qualifications of its author and its avowed rational approach, the book is in many respects unsatisfying and even disappointing. Perhaps its basic weakness is in the ambition of its scope. As the title *A Faith of Moderns* indicates, it does not purport to be merely a work on Judaism from the viewpoint of a committed believer. "Drawing upon the insights of Biblical and post-Biblical religion but in no sectarian spirit, I have sought to set forth the basic elements of a religious view of life that will be tenable for modern men and women, whatever their formal religious affiliation, or even if they

**A Faith for Moderns*, by Robert Gordis, New York: Bloch Publishing Co., 1960.

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have none" (author's foreword).

It is necessary that we first examine the fundamental premise that there is such a collective entity as "religious tradition" from which source all can draw in common and each individual should apply specifically in the observance of his own formal, institutional mode of religious behavior. It is doubtful that there is such a collective tradition for the advocates of particular faiths. While we speak of a Judeo-Christian heritage, is it not true that this heritage does not exist in any specific sense for the adherents of any individual religious denomination? The believing Jew *qua* believing Jew is heir only to the Jewish tradition and heritage, and not to the Judeo-Christian heritage. The believing Christian, as such, is heir to the Judaic portion of the Christian heritage in a substantially different sense from the Jew, for whom the 613 commandments are its most basic element. Thus, there is no common Judeo-Christian heritage either for the believing Jew or the believing Christian. This term would most appropriately be used by people in Western civilization who reject the specific, binding content of either faith but accept certain common elements of both as the basic moral and spiritual principles of Western man. The very fact that it is acknowledged as an essential component of Western civilization establishes its disembodiment from any specific forms of institutional religion. By the same token we are heirs to Greek civilization only to the extent that Greek civilization is for us disembodied from any of its original

specific forms and has been assimilated into the fabric of Western civilization.

There is further objection to Dr. Gordis' appeal to the authority of a common religious "tradition." He does not hesitate to include in this category even primitive religions: "Hence one of the most enduring beliefs in religion *linking the most primitive and the most advanced forms* and finding expression in countless forms and rites, is the all but universal conviction that death does not end all for men" (p. 157).

Gordis' idea that all of "religion" is linked together in some positive sense runs counter the entire viewpoint of Judaism which is utterly opposed to all idolatrous beliefs, forms, and rites, and divorces itself completely from all associations with pagan religion. It is impossible to speak of a link between truth and falsehood unless it be a false link. Although both astrology and astronomy study the stars, it would be foolish to attempt to link the conceptions and laws of modern astronomy to the notions and superstitions of primitive astrology. Even less so do the believers in monotheism share anything, in a religious sense, with the believers in polytheism. Monotheism is no more closely akin with polytheism than it is with atheism.

Even a thinker as remote from formal religion as John Dewey was quick to detect the fallacy in this approach. "What boots it to accept, in defense of the universality of religion, a definition that applies equally to the most savage and degraded beliefs and practices that have related to unseen powers and

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to noble ideas of a religion having the greatest share of moral content?" (*A Common Faith* — Chap. 1). But this is exactly what Dr. Gordis does when he writes: "We should like to define religion as man's sense of relationship to the world and the forms, both individual and collective, for expressing this relationship. The implications of this definition are of crucial importance. Our formulation is broad enough to embrace all forms of religious expression and organization, including religions that do not maintain the belief in a Supreme Being of God, such as Buddhism" (p. 58).

This serves to illustrate the book's basic premise which, we believe, is equally unacceptable to both religionist and modernist.

In addition to (or perhaps because of) the weakness of the basic general approach, there is much in Dr. Gordis' treatment of specific theological themes that does not stand up to careful scrutiny by either the standards of authentic Jewish thought or those of critical modern thinking. While seeking to satisfy both, he often succeeds in satisfying neither. Space does not permit consideration of more than three of these topics: Revelation (Chapter 9), Ritual (Chapter 16), and Prayer (Chapter 15).

REVELATION

The crux of Dr. Gordis' view on revelation is the rejection of a "static" notion of literal revelation in favor of a "dynamic" view of this process in which man is an active partner, adding to its message, meaning, and relevance to modern

life. Thus: "Revelation is not impugned by viewing it as another aspect of this eternal partnership between God and man. In this 'cosmic symbiosis,' God depends upon man as truly as man depends upon God" (p. 150). Or: "Men will always be having the revelation of God, but never the complete revelation: What they grasp will be approaching the divine 'infinity,' but never quite reaching its fulness. Hence, the content of revelation vouchsafed to man constitutes a growing and evolving body of insights, ideals, and imperatives" (p. 151).

Now Dr. Gordis is not merely granting the subjective reactions to an objective revelation and the concomitant growth of interpretations of this body of revelation. For him, the very content of revelation is inherently imperfect: "The Divine factor in the Scriptures is intermingled with fallible and imperfect elements that reflect the human aspect" (p. 152). "Besides, the modern spirit finds elements in the tradition that it cannot accept as the will of God. The command 'Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live' (Ex. 22:17), the injunction to exterminate the Canaanites, or the tale told of the prophet of Elisha's curse which killed forty-two children who taunted him (II Kings 2:23-24), passages such as these affront men's ethical consciousness . . ." (p. 147). Dr. Gordis seems to identify himself in this matter with the modern critical spirit.

He also seems to deny the divine character of some of the biblical ritual commandments, though no moral question is involved: "It is well known that the Five Books

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of Moses contain a considerable amount of ritual commands by the side of ethical teaching and social legislation. Modern men, even if they are disposed to obey the ritual, do not regard the command 'Thou shalt not see the a kid in its mother's milk' as being of equal importance with 'Thou shalt not murder.' One may discern the will of God in the latter prohibition; it is more difficult to regard the former in this light" (p. 148).

Notwithstanding the veiled language, Dr. Gordis is, in effect, rejecting the divine character of the prohibition of meat and milk and sees in it an inauthentic Revelation. The range of his entire discussion warrants this conclusion. Thus, he writes in the preceding paragraph: "If Scripture is a transcript of God's word, everything in it must be of equal importance. Maimonides was thoroughly consistent in insisting that the genealogies of Esau in Genesis are equally sacred with the Ten Commandments of The Golden Rule (*sic*). Few of our contemporaries could subscribe to such a position today."

Nowhere in the discussion does Dr. Gordis refute these contentions. Though not proclaiming this clearly in his own name, he definitely identifies himself with the "modern spirit" and majority position of "our contemporaries" in rejecting the total authentic revelation of Scriptures.

So much for the record. Now let us examine the argument. The reasoning is fallacious. Equal authenticity of revelation for the various components of Scripture is equated with the equal importance

of these components. Since we do not accept the various commandments as being equally important, it follows, according to the author, that they are not equally authentic in expressing the will of God.

In truth, however, we have here a false premise leading to a false conclusion. No Jewish authority maintains that all commandments are equally important. Obviously when two commandments conflict one must temporarily give way to the other. Thus, Jewish Law ordains that the saving of human life ("Thou shalt not kill") takes precedence over all the other *mitzvot*, save for the violation of the three cardinal sins. It does not follow that because God commanded us "Thou shalt not kill," and this commandment takes precedence over "Thou shalt not see the a kid in its mother's milk," that God did not issue the latter commandment.

To use a human analogy, it would be foolish to maintain that because a father commanded his son "do not steal," which is unequal in ethical importance with the command "close the door," that he could not issue the latter command. Equal authenticity does not mean equal importance, and unequal importance does not mean unequal authenticity.

Aside from the invalidity of the argument, the concluding proposition is inherently meaningless. The substance of Dr. Gordis' position is that we can only accept the authenticity of revelation and its authority for teachings that we know to be true and valid from sources other than revelation, such as human reason and conscience. The obvious

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question presents itself: why then bother with the concept of revelation at all if it has no authority in its own right and has no real content of its own? Revelation, in this sense, is nothing but a tautology. The author's expression of belief in it is little more than lip service to traditional religion and its sensibilities. Logically, it signifies naught.

RITUAL

Ethics is viewed by Dr. Gordis as being the core of religion; ritual is of secondary importance. As support for this position, the argument is adduced that the Ten Commandments which are the "noblest expression of religion" are primarily ethical. The author derives from this fact nothing less than a mathematical formula: "Quantitatively viewed, therefore, Biblical religion emphasized ethical practice as against ritual and belief in the ratio of six to three to one" (p. 278).

This is fallacious logic. "The noblest expression of biblical religion" in the premise is transformed into "biblical religion," without any qualification, in the conclusion. The noblest expression of biblical religion is not equivalent to biblical religion in its totality, for the "noblest expression" is not necessarily the most representative expression or the truest sample selection of biblical religion. In fact, the very qualification "noblest" indicates that that group is a select group and not a fair sample of the whole. If one were to say that the Bill of Rights is the noblest expression of American constitutional law it would not follow that we may

derive an accurate knowledge of the content of the entire Constitution on the basis of our knowledge of the Bill of Rights. As a matter of fact, the Bill of Rights was later appended to the Constitution precisely because the body of the Constitution did not clearly embody its basic principles.

Moreover, in the case of biblical religion, it is demonstrably untrue that the proportion of ethical commandments as against ritual commandments is two to one. Even a cursory examination of the 613 commandments belies this notion. Of the thirty-six serious infractions of the law, listed at the beginning of Mishnah *Keritot*, for which the punishment is excision, well over half are clearly of a ritual character.

Aside from the logical and factual criticism of these particular statements, it must be emphasized that the singling out of the Ten Commandments from the Bible runs counter to Jewish tradition. The Talmud (*Berakhot* 12a) teaches: "Rab Judah said in the name of Samuel: Outside the Temple also people wanted to do the same [recite the Ten Commandments before the Shema] but they were stopped on account of the insinuations of the *minim* (disbelievers, sectaries)." Rashi *a.l.* explains: "Lest they tell the ignorant that the rest of the Torah is not true. This is evidenced by the fact that they do not recite aught but that which the Holy One blessed be He proclaimed and they heard from His mouth at Sinai."

The Talmud's warning was not in vain. Dr. Gordis is led by his

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process of reasoning, beginning with the primacy of the Ten Commandments, to a very dangerous conclusion indeed: "It follows that in the hierarchy of values, ethical conduct rates higher even than the Sabbath, the most exalted and fundamental of Jewish rituals . . . Ritual is a means to an end . . . It is therefore clear that in traditional religion, ritual is less important than ethics" (p. 278).

Does it not follow that a person may violate the Sabbath in order to do a favor for a friend? The author does not distinguish between rituals of one sort or another, or between ethical conduct of one sort or another. His sole distinction is between ritual (of any sort) and ethical conduct (of any sort), hence implying that even any sort of ethical conduct warrants the violation of any ritual, even the Sabbath! This contradicts the unequivocal decision of the Halakhah that the Sabbath may never be desecrated, save for matters of life or death.

Furthermore, the author's dichotomy between ritual and ethics is not authentically Jewish. The Talmud makes two kinds of distinctions: a) sins between man and man and sins between man and God (Mishnah *Yoma* Ch. 8), and b) *mitzvot* that are rational (*mishpatim*) and *mitzvot* that are not apparently rational (*chukkim*) and whose authority derives only from Revelation (*Yoma* 67b).

Neither of these two classifications corresponds with the distinction between ritual and ethics as expounded by Dr. Gordis, for neither distinction posits the primacy

of one category over the other. The first distinction is mentioned by the Mishnah in connection with the repentance on Yom Kippur and only states that sins between man and man cannot be forgiven by repentance to God alone since the wrong-doing involved a sin against man too. It does not imply, as Dr. Gordis seems to think, "that infractions of the ethical law are more severe than violations of ritual law."

The second distinction is made by the Talmud with the intention of emphasizing that ritual law is no less important than rational law, in view of the fact that both are expressed in the same verse: "Do my judgments and keep my enactments" (Lev. 18:4). In this classification there is no excluded middle. Only a handful of commandments are here designated by the Talmud as ritual laws. A similar number are designated as judgments or rational law. These include the prohibitions of idolatry and blasphemy which for Dr. Gordis are rituals.

Here lies the crux of the matter. Authentic rabbinic tradition does not recognize these as ritual laws inasmuch as they define an ethical relationship between man and God. As Bachya ibn Pakuda emphasizes in his *Chovot ha-Levavot*, our basic relationship to God is an ethical one based on the divine-human principle of gratitude. To view our relationship to God as purely ritual and divorced from the principles of ethical obligation does violence to biblical as well as rabbinic Judaism — the fact of the exodus from Egypt is invoked often as a reminder of our ethical obligation to ful-

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fill the *mitzvot* of the Almighty (See Lev. 22:33 and Sifra *a.l.*). Moreover, as Saadia Gaon points out, the rational commandments include a goodly number of the *mitzvot* and even the revelational laws contain rational elements.

Judah Halevi gives us the correct evaluation of the relationship that exists between the ritual and the rational commandments when he describes the rational commandments as the lower rung on the ladder of perfection and the ritual commandments as the higher rung and embodying more of the divine element, the *Inyan Elohi*. The former are more necessary because they are indispensable in every human society, but the latter bring man closer to the fountainhead of divinity and are more distinctively of a Jewish religious character. "For the divine law cannot become complete till the social and rational laws are perfected" (*Kuzari* 2:8. See TRADITION [Vol. II No. 1] p. 14).

The downgrading of ritual by Dr. Gordis seems to be motivated by the following consideration. If it can be established that ethics is the core of religion, then it follows that all religions are variations on the same basic theme, glaring differences in theology and ritual practices being pushed into the background and periphery. Hence it is possible to speak of "A Faith for Moderns" that can appeal to all. It is also possible to reduce the bulk of religious practices to expressions of ethical teachings, ritual becoming the vehicle of ethics. Thus Dr. Gordis concludes after illustrating the ethical import

of a number of Jewish rituals: "A parallel roster of religious and ethical teachings can be drawn up for each of the other great religions" (p. 281).

This construction, however, ignores the heart of religious experience and the real content of most religions. There is, on the one hand, much of the mystical element that is central to religion. The Christian religion, for example, even emphasizes the mystical element in faith to a significantly greater degree than does Judaism. On the other hand, there is no compelling reason for limiting responsibility for ethical conduct to the province of organized religion. Ethical standards derived from any source, even a purely humanistic one, are necessary for the survival of society and are therefore to be encouraged. Judaism teaches this lesson when it reduces the religious obligations of the sons of Noah to commandments that are primarily ethical. Consequently, Dr. Gordis' position on the relation of ethics to ritual is unacceptable both from the viewpoint of traditional Judaism and that of modern thought.

PRAYER

Lastly we turn to the subject of prayer. The crucial problem in this chapter is the efficacy of prayer. Interestingly enough, the author's conclusion in favor of this belief is not based on traditional Jewish doctrine or Scriptural authority but on the fact of its popular acceptance: "Through the ages the experience of millions of men and women has been strong in echoing the Psalmist's conviction: 'The

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Lord has heard my petition; the Lord accepteth my prayer' (Ps. 6:10)" (pp. 248-9).

In the above quotation the author combines Scriptural teaching with folk belief. Further in the discussion, however, mass acceptance emerges as the decisive factor for the author in attaining his conviction that prayers are answered: "Are such prayers [i.e. for healing] answered? Here we can only fall back upon the testimony of untold thousands of men and women in every walk of life who testify to the healing power of prayer . . . Are all the countless instances in which prayers for health were followed by healing merely cases of coincidence at best, or instances of self-deception at worst? Somehow the answer is too pat to be convincing. That prayers are efficacious has been the innermost conviction of men in every religion, on every level of culture and intelligence" (p. 253).

Popular opinion, for Dr. Gordis, assumes the role of an authority of the highest order. In another context, while discussing the equally difficult theological question of immortality, Dr. Gordis again invokes the authority of folk belief as the final arbiter.

"It has been suggested by some scholars, though denied by others, that foreign influences, like that of Persian Mazdaism, played their part in the emergence of this doctrine of the after-life in Judaism and Christianity. *Be that as it may, it is clear that it responded to the deepest aspirations of the people and therefore became basic.* Traditional religion now sought warrant

for the faith in the here-after by homiletical interpretations . . . *but the real authority of the doctrine derived from passionately felt inner needs of men*" (p. 231. Italics mine).

In this scheme, theology is the handmaiden of mass opinion and wishes. It is our contention that neither science nor classical Jewish religion can accept such a criterion as valid for determining truth. The voice of the majority is at most (but not always) a legitimate means of deciding matters of government. It is not, or at least should not be, a way of deciding truth in matters of religion, philosophy, or science.

The author, seeming to sense the inadequacy of this argument, proceeds to buttress his position on the efficacy of prayer by a further argument of a more rational sort. Unfortunately, when he goes on to offer "a scientifically tenable theory," he jumps from the frying pan into the fire: "Moreover, the effect of prayer on illness, in view of the changed spirit of the scientific temper today, need no longer be airily dismissed as an illusion. We should like to suggest that several insights afforded by contemporary medicine and psychology may supply the basis for a scientifically tenable theory as to the process by which prayers for the ill are answered . . . When the patient knows that others are praying for him, that they crave his health and well-being, his own desire to get well is fortified and his recovery is speeded" (pp. 253-4). He then proceeds to argue on the basis of the experiments of J. B. Rhine in extra-

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sensory perception "that a prayer for the ill, even when the sufferer is unaware of it, may prove effective," by impinging upon the subconscious of the patient.

All of this is of an extremely dubious scientific character. It is a straining of credulity to believe that a germ-disease is cured by will power gained through extra-sensory perception. But, were we even to accept this "scientific explanation," it would prove nothing as far as a religious belief in prayer is concerned. It would apply as well to a witch doctor incanting before an idol for the cure of a tribesman and claiming curative powers for himself. Religious belief in the efficacy of prayer is based solely on the belief in God as our Healer. The argument from psychology, if anything, would tend to weaken the traditional Jewish belief in prayer.

Apparently Dr. Gordis is not too sure of his ground, for in the latter half of the chapter he refuses to take any definite position: "To sum up, we may be . . . either minimalists or maximalists in our view of the efficacy of prayer. We may feel that the value of prayers of petition is purely psychological, bringing relief to the prayer in his distress, or we may believe that prayers impinge directly upon reality and can change the shape of things to come. Whatever our view, however, it is the teaching of classic religion that God's will is paramount and that He needs no instruction from us as to our needs and desires" (p. 257).

This is as good an argument against the efficacy of prayer as

one could hope to find. It is difficult to comprehend, though, how this statement summarizes the preceding lengthy argument for the efficacy of prayer.

CONCLUDING METHODOLOGICAL NOTE

May we in turn summarize our evaluation? We may be maximalist or minimalist in our approach to Jewish tradition. We may believe that our commitment to Judaism should be based exclusively on the transmitted tradition, or we may believe that it should be tempered by considerations based on human reason and a modern outlook. Whatever our view, however, this book will offer little to satisfy the needs and desires of its readers. To neither group does it offer a clearly formulated set of guiding principles. It is very difficult, for example, to ascertain to what degree Dr. Gordis agrees with the Thirteen Principles of Faith drawn up by Maimonides, and where he differs.

Finally, Dr. Gordis does not make it clear to the reader whether revelation is primarily a divine act or a human process of discovery, whether ritual plays an absolute role in religion or a conditional and conditioned role, whether prayer is an objective action directed to God or a subjective act directed to one's self. It is not enough to promise that the truth of religion lies somewhere in the tension between the poles of the divine and the human, without the clear delimitation of this area. It is not enough to say that man is a partner to God in the of creation, without an explicit definition of the nature of this part-

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nership. For Dr. Gordis everything is in a state of becoming, nothing simply is.

This is not a sound methodological approach. As Gillespie writes in his book *The Edge of Objectivity*, p. 341 “. . . science derives rather from the contemplation of being in the light of reason, than of becoming in the light of process . . . It posits the existence of specific entities which may serve as the terms of analysis. But in becoming

everything blends into everything, and nothing may ever be defined.”

This same truth might very well be applied to Jewish theology. Judaism as a clearly defined way of life deserves a clearly defined set of basic theological principles. Happily, the Halakhah provides us with such a precise framework. This book would have been immeasurably better had it been based on this foundation stone of Jewish thinking as well as of Jewish living.