

# A RABBI AND 'THE SEED OF ETERNAL LIFE'

By LIONEL BLUE

**T**HE JEWS IN Britain have never been a shining light of spirituality — worthy yes, inspiring no. Before the war, traditional Jews imported their piety from Poland and progressive Jews from Germany. We were the importers not the exporters of spirituality. The holocaust changed all that. The polish and german communities went up (literally) in smoke, and what was left of jewish learning had to find new roots in Britain (in London or Gateshead, the latter chosen for its lack of attraction and dullness so that it did not distract the soul). I was one of the first students of these transplanted colleges. It is called the Leo Baeck College after the last Chief Rabbi of Germany who returned to Germany in August 1939 to remain with the remnants of his flock. It was the successor of the *Hochschule für die Wissenschaft des Judentums* in Berlin.

I shall try to describe some of my own problems as a rabbi in the chaos of post-war jewish life, and some of the problems of my colleagues. Mine are not that different from those of my colleagues, but each of us has had to find his own way home to join past to present, to apply a way of life meant for a closed traditional society to one that is not only open but permissive, to marry religion to the realities of our communal life, to find a way to sanctity in what exists, because all the sermons and pep talks in the world will not change those realities.

One problem is that we are missing a generation of teachers, and in Judaism the chain of tradition is very important. This is where authority resides. I have had to learn from books what previous generations of Europeans learnt from people. I know this has made me more insecure with regard to tradition. I find it less easy to be comfortable with it, to joke about it, to play with it. Another consequence of this break is that young rabbis have had to take on responsibilities of leadership before they were ready. There just was no time to be a curate or assistant. A few years after I was ordained, I was appointed Religious Director for Europe to look after the survivor communities in the progressive tradition. I was in fact the bishop of a bankrupt diocese with a long title, little money, and told to do what I could amidst the ruins. This of course is an extreme case, but everyone in my generation of rabbis has felt it. This forced

precociousness has had an indirect but good result. Because we have been out of our depth we have had to seek help from wherever we could get it. There is not much first class religion around, and you cannot afford to worry too much about the label. Ecumenism was not for us an exercise in politeness but a real 'looksee' to find out if there was anything worth appropriating. After the war we were quite capable of judaizing it. Apart from a few individuals, conversion was no longer a problem. More people seemed to want to enter Judaism than to leave it.

But there were unspoken questions which we were ill qualified to answer. They may not seem new to an academic theologian, but only a working rabbi could understand their force. Eighty per cent of european Jewry died in the holocaust, every family was bereaved, and the survivors were stunned by the grotesque absurdity of it all, of decent and cultured parents gassed and turned into bars of soap. The questions they asked with their being if not with their lips were 'Where was God in all this?' 'How do we locate him in the pointlessness and the waste of it all?', and then 'So many prayers must have been said in those cattle trucks, but they were never answered, not in any sense we can understand; why pray?'. The persecution had intensified jewish belonging and identity, and the communal outer shell of the religion had hardened and toughened in those years but at the centre of it all, old certainties had turned into frightening but basic problems.

This is all necessary background, but I must now try to answer the question of how a rabbi, reasonably middle of the road like myself, and ordained after the war, can find God? I think we find him as Jews have always found him, through activity and study. We are not expected to be saints or mystics or even exceptionally kind and good. We are expected to know a lot, to be able to lead, to be the voice of our communities and to represent them, and we are expected to work very hard. Our pay is reasonable and we are expected to earn it. We administrate, we sit on countless committees (the same people reshuffled), we are the mayors, judges, and entertainers of our congregations. Our main path to holiness is that we do this work conscientiously, serving these congregations more than we serve ourselves. Then we start to be released from the self, and a path to holiness opens up for a religious bureaucrat. The monotony of monastic life is paralleled for us by the monotony of forms, set speeches, and routine stupidity and incompetence.

Rabbis have to get through a lot of liturgy. Long christian services are short by jewish standards, and I do not think it is easy to recite all that has to be recited according to tradition with zeal, understanding and intention. Sometimes one feels in the mood, sometimes

one does not. Sometimes belief is natural, sometimes we wonder how we ever got tied up with such a strange task. But because our love of our communities is genuine, we go on and do all that has to be done whether we like it or not. This too, is a way of forgetting the self. Taking a service and above all taking it well, when it does not seem to mean that much to you, is a sacrifice of the spirit, worth a lot of charismatic *frissons*. I do not know how this will seem to a christian reader. Its pedestrian quality might put him off. But in the immediate past, martyrs were made and fashioned by this commonplace sense of duty, and work done with competence and consistency. A generation of Jews were kept sane in an insane time. Liturgy is not, I think, our problem. A lot of liturgical revision has taken place, some of it is rhetorical of course and some of it religious evasion, but a lot of it is inventive and on occasion profound as it tries to assimilate the holocaust and the rise of Israel into the religious tradition. The present concerns are welded onto the past and the join does not disturb the continuity of jewish experience.

But the problem is prayer, individual prayer, prayers said alone, or in silence, prayers said to God direct not through the tried formulas of tradition. We have had to ask ourselves why we need it at all. A Jew after all is supposed to do the will of God, and this does not make any 'happening' necessary or even relevant.

I think we need more prayer now because we cannot rely on the old textbooks so much. A problem comes to us, we look it up in the index, we turn to the page indicated and read the answer, and know we cannot use it because it was designed for a closed society and in an open and permissive one it does not fit. A lot of Judaism in our time has become 'do-it-yourself'. Without benefit of clergy, our congregations make their own anthology of tradition and no two anthologies are the same. We were trained to be judges in a united little world but we are now the arbitrators of its inconsistencies. Pluralism has come to stay, and if we are good rabbis we shall find a way to hallow what we cannot change. As I have said, we are expected to be clever. Some of us are fools but we are regarded as wise and expected to appear so.

The past has told what was the will of God for us in a closed society, but we must now ask what is the will of God for us in an open one. Since this has hardly ever happened in the last two millennia of jewish history, with God's help we have to make up an awful lot as we go along. If holiness and spirituality are doing the will of God, then obedience and fidelity are not enough. We must also be inventive and creative as well, or we shall allow a living religion to become a museum piece with ourselves as curators of dead piety. This would be a real betrayal of our calling. Now what is

the technology of the spirit but prayer. That is why some post-war rabbis are interested in christian religious orders, especially the contemplative ones. We are not so interested in the Third World because we do not have one any more. Some of it was murdered, most of it became middle class through its own efforts, with communal help. Christian ministers also seem to us to be too ready to be an opposition, while by our training we think of ourselves as a government, whether or not this has any reality.

Our biggest religious problems come from the insecure affluence of our middle class congregations. Unconsciously we assimilate attitudes and carry them with us even when we try to enter our own Holy of Holies. Here are some examples of our spiritual temptations.

We apply the same standards of efficiency to religion which were so successful in producing goods. We think of 'results'. But what are religious results? In practice, this usually means buildings, which look solid and obvious. So a lot of religiosity and work is directed into real estate. We then have to form committees to fill the rooms we have constructed. There is a lot of activity but these buildings need an analysis of the point of it all apart from communalism. After all, a whole lifetime devoted ministry may 'result' in the fact that one has influenced a few impressionable kids or showed one or two housewives how to relate their drudgery to divinity.

The key to all jewish study in the past was that it was done *lishmah*, that is, for its own sake. It was not a crown to adorn yourself with, nor a spade to dig with (*Ethics of the Fathers*). It was not done to acquire a degree, a diploma, or a qualification that you could frame and hang in your living room. These external material consequences can nullify the internal spiritual consequence of your study for you. My generation of rabbis has had a struggle to prevent the perversion of religion by 'success, the bitch goddess'.

Because we are involved in the politics of community, we have to resist the strong pressures which affect our job, our livelihood and our families. If we express unpopular opinions there is little or no hierarchy to help us. Rabbinical life is something of a free-for-all and though there is a lot of humour and kindness, it is tough, and congregations and rabbis go their own wilful way. Their quarrels are amply reported in the jewish press and make entertaining reading. The only surprise is how few are hurt in the rough and tumble of jewish life.

In this article I have spoken of the religious problems of those rabbis who try to come to terms with an open and permissive society. Strictly traditional rabbis are having equal though different problems in trying to keep their distance from it, and prevent their

congregations struggling into pastures strictly forbidden by traditional rabbinic law. But the spiritual temptations I have described above can be had in radical or traditional guises. Both wings of Judaism have been enmeshed in politics and the media, both have tried to spiritualize politics and mass communication, and both have been used by both and coarsened by them. Secularization can be had with or without traditional expressions of piety. As I have indicated before, the 'bitch goddess' can appear in many fashions.

On reading back what I have written, I see that I have not given an account of spiritual or pietistic systems. These are sometimes used as gimmicks in the Jewish world, either as 'happenings' to enliven truths that have become over familiar, or to entertain bored or jaded congregations. For people who have done it all and seen it all, mysticism is the last 'trip' to go on, though I do not think that it helps to make one's hedonism cosmic. Spirituality for a rabbi is not something extra to his job, not doing something different from it, but doing the same things, often routine and boring things with more responsibility and integrity.

Our hope is that if we are faithful and honest with the things of this world and do not try to cheat, then we will find in them the seeds of eternal life and a glimpse of the world to come. I think that most rabbis since the war feel inadequate. All of us feel that we are the remnant of something much greater, that we are living in the ruins of a more learned and more pious world than our own. But, looking at my colleagues, I sense that perhaps we are more godly than we know. We had to cope after all with communal anger and bitterness, great waves of nationalism, and the demand of our congregations for a 'material' Judaism of results. In these circumstances it is surprising what has been achieved and reconstructed. If this is so, we must have been given a 'lift' of which we were unaware because we were so taken up by the details. Perhaps if you are becoming a bit spiritual you do not have the time to notice it!