



A Future for Judaism?

by David Mishkin

The National Jewish Population Survey in 1990 startled many of my fellow Jews. This study was released by the Council of Jewish Federations. The survey showed that 5.5 million Americans self-identified as Jews. While this might appear to be a hopeful number, the outlook presented is somewhat bleak:

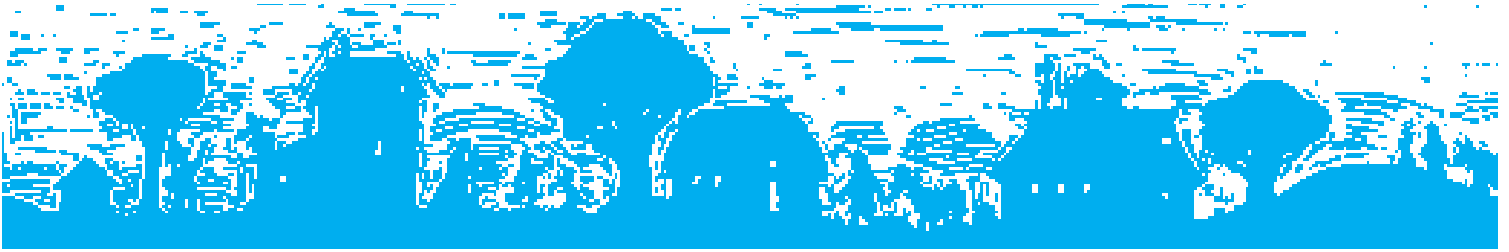
- 1.1 million considered themselves merely “cultural” Jews not likely to observe Jewish holidays or affiliate with synagogues or Jewish institutions.
- 1.3 million said that they have another religion but were of Jewish descent.
- The report also confirmed that the rate of Jewish intermarriage had soared from 9 percent before 1964 to 52 percent after 1985.¹

In recent years, Jewish leaders have become alarmed. Intermarriage, assimilation, low birth rate and general apathy toward the Jewish religion and culture fuels fear that in another half-century there won't be enough of a Jewish community to survey.

Most Jewish books on this crisis focus on social programs and the community aspects as a solution to the problem of survival. However, what is rarely discussed are the beliefs and subsequent convictions that form the foundation of who we are.

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In The Little Shtetl Of Vaysechvoos

In Vaysechvoos, it was not unusual for babies to be born dead or die shortly after birth. More didn't survive their first year, and those who continued into childhood were always fraught with all kinds of illness and subject to accidents. If there weren't illnesses, then there were pogroms, so that those who managed to live to become adults were certainly in the minority.

Malka was not given her name, though it was custom for Jewish girls to be given an appellation in their first week. Everyone believed that Malka would momentarily die. No one could recall if her father even went to the synagogue and declared her birth and gave her a name. It was said instead that the *Molach Ha Mavos* was seen in the reflection of her eyes. Thus, she was regarded as one whose death was imminent, and the name *Molach Ha Mavos* stuck. When it appeared that she would live ever so slightly longer, they called her Malka for short.

Malka had four older brothers and three older sisters, and as an infant she received much care. But then she always needed care. She didn't have it in her to take much nourishment and often sneezed and coughed. At best, the family was just trying to keep her alive a little bit longer. She learned to walk, but just barely, because of a severe club foot. For that she earned the name *de kalyaka*. She learned to talk, but not very well because of a harelip. For that she was called *de shtummer*.

Malka received some of the most attentive healing the very experienced wives of Vaysechvoos might deliver. Because they noticed that the

child's legs were weak and she had difficulty learning to stand, they used the strongest of medicine—ground bone of an ox's leg and very fine iron filings, which they applied as a poultice to her spindly legs. True, she didn't develop a whole lot of strength in the legs, but the scarlet color and skin eruptions were evidence to the wives that their medicine was working.

Likewise, there were chicken dung and mustard plasters that helped with her lungs, not to mention the rendered chicken schmaltz that was poured into her ears in an attempt to heal her deafness. And one could go on and on.

It seemed that every month there was another life-threatening crisis for Malka. She would cough and wheeze and run a high fever, and sometimes she would stop breathing altogether. Members of the *Chevra Kiddusha* visited Malka so often it caused additional hardship, since Malka's mother knew it was her duty to feed them. But the expense of feeding the members of the *Chevra Kiddusha* became a burden on the family, so they weren't so inclined to encourage them to visit.

The family just prayed more that Malka would be revived. But if there was any illness in the village or anywhere else in the district, Malka had it. And because she couldn't balance herself well, she had accident after accident. It seemed like at one time or another she suffered from a bone that was broken or a laceration that quickly became infected. But with each calamity, her family hoped and prayed that she would live a little longer.

Even as she entered the age when most girls

become women, that part of her life never seemed to come to her. But if she didn't have monthly cramps, she had every other kind of cramp. People knew that she lived in pain. That was why they called her *Malka de choileh* or "the sick one." It seemed to reflect everyone's opinion of her.

Remarkably, she became taller if not stronger than most of the women in Vaysechvoos. Big-boned, she should have been able to lift a lot, but after all, she was only a *choileh*. The time came when her parents hopefully tried to arrange a marriage. But no one was interested because they knew that if she didn't die in the first few months of marriage, it would happen the following winter. So Malka became an unclaimed blessing.

She never ate much. She never quarreled much because she never said much. She required little. Her palsied hands wouldn't allow her to learn sewing or even yarn making. And though she was a burden to her family, they didn't mind because they all knew that she'd be with them for only a little while.

The years went on, and when her parents went to be with the Almighty, her brothers and sisters took on the responsibility of caring for her. But they too passed on, and the responsibility fell to their children to tend to the aged and still sickly Malka. They reasoned that it would only be for a short time since she was now 94. But, in all



honesty they and the rest of Vaysechvoos had given up all expectations of her imminent death.

But her passing came and she welcomed the one who was the constant companion of her life, the *Molach Ha Mavos*. And her soul flew away with him. The rabbi, who knew Malka to have been an example of patience and endurance, gave a eulogy at

a funeral that was attended by everyone in Vaysechvoos. He explained that the meaning of her life was that the Almighty, blessed be His name forever and ever, had seen fit to keep this child, this woman from death as an example to show that he is the author and the giver of life under every circumstance. "Malka the *Choileh*" he proclaimed, "typified the nation of Israel. By the world's standards, Israel should have been destroyed long ago, the Jewish people made extinct—but for

one very important fact." The Rabbi of Vaysechvoos paused and then with a knowing smile he concluded, "That fact is that we have a God who keeps his promises."

GLOSSARY

- Molach Ha Mavos***: angel of death
- de kalyaka***: the crippled one
- de shtummer***: the silent one
- Chevra Kiddusha***: burial society
- de choileh***: the sick one

PRONUNCIATION

- | | | | |
|-----------|----------------------------|-----------|------------|
| a | as in far | u | as in full |
| i | as in is (within a word) | o | as in go |
| ch | as in <i>ach!</i> (German) | oi | as in toy |
| e | as in met | | |

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Three recent books by rabbis deal with precisely this topic. *The God I Believe In* is a remarkable book of interviews featuring some of today's outstanding Jewish thinkers. *The Future of Judaism* offers a controversial solution for the survival of Judaism based on already existing attitudes. Finally, *Teaching Our Children About God* is one rabbi's treatise on the nature and character of the Almighty himself, as well as how we may impart this information to the next generation.

The God I Believe In

by Joshua O. Haberman



Rabbi Haberman was born in Vienna and has served as a rabbi for more than fifty years in the United States. This book, he explains, is part of the continuing process of his own understanding about God. It is not an attempt to explain official Jewish doctrines of faith,

but rather it is a glimpse into the personal thoughts of a variety of Jewish opinion leaders. Haberman raises many key issues that need to be addressed. These include the authority of Scripture, the chosenness of the Jewish people and the possibility of personally knowing God.

All of those questioned were quick to assert their commitment to their own Jewish identity. And, in one way or another, they all acknowledged a belief in God. Beyond that, however, their answers were as varied as their respective backgrounds. The fourteen interviewees include:

three eminent scientists, two acclaimed novelists, two philosophers, the only American-born Hasidic leader, Soviet Jewry's most famous resistance hero, a University president, a convert, a leading theologian, the editor-in-chief of a leading magazine, and the world's best-known talmudist.²

The question of which Scriptures are authoritative and who decides upon their authoritative interpretation must be foundational to all other

beliefs. Some of the interviewees declared that the Torah is not God's word although God is somehow "in it." Novelist Chaim Potok was asked if he believed that God personally dictated the Torah to Moses. He responded, "No, but I don't need that." Others are still rethinking the whole subject in the light of Auschwitz. One common strand was the fact that they were all quite aware that there is simply no definitive authority structure in modern Judaism.

"Picking and choosing" in both practice and belief has become normative.

The issue of chosenness had the most agreement. The interviewees all acknowledged that it is difficult to deny the uniqueness of the Jewish people throughout history. At the same time, most were quick to add that this does not imply being better. While recognizing Jewish uniqueness as unavoidable, the purpose of such uniqueness seemed to be a perplexing mystery that most did not dare to explain.

Regarding the reality of God and how we can "experience" him, the answers were diverse. Surprisingly, the more orthodox often quoted twentieth-century philosophers like Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig rather than the great rabbis and

sages of old. To experience the Almighty, some said, requires daily observance of mitzvot. Others — those less immersed in orthodoxy — found God elsewhere, often in the beauty or perfection of nature. For the most part, however, the issue of knowing and understanding God seems to be fading into the background. For example, Jewish novelist Cynthia Ozick responded:



I may not be able to say what God is, who God is, how God is; I can make no definitive statement, no attributive statement about the source of being. But I can say what the source is not. I'm free of idols; I'm not going to fall for false gods, false ideas. I'm buoyed up; I'm shaped by ethical monotheism, by Torah.³

Haberman concludes by expressing hope for Jewish survival. The basis for this, he believes, is the fact that we have survived in the past. He does not specifically acknowledge God as the one responsible for this survival. For both Haberman and those he interviewed, God has become a secondary issue, a matter of personal choice or speculation. And if today's Jewish leaders are having such difficulty, what does this say about a Jewish future?

The Future of Judaism

by Dan Cohn-Sherbok



Dan Cohn-Sherbok is British and an ordained rabbi who is currently professor of Jewish theology at the University of Kent. He is also visiting professor at Middlesex University. His book, *The Future of*

Judaism, was originally inspired by a student of his who asked,

How can Judaism survive if Jews today can't agree any more on the fundamental principles of the Jewish faith? Does Judaism really have a future if there's so much disagreement?⁴

Cohn-Sherbok traces the roots of Jewish diversity and then offers a solution for the future. One of his main theses is that Judaism was monolithic until the period of the Enlightenment and then, with the advent of the Reform movement, Judaism began its period of fragmentation. By monolithic, he does not imply that there was merely one expression of orthodoxy. He writes in detail of the schisms and disagreements throughout all of Jewish

history. Rather, he sees the belief in the divine origin of the Scriptures as the basis of this monolithic faith.

Cohn-Sherbok then outlines the forms of "non-orthodox alternatives" that have emerged since the Enlightenment. He begins with the Reform movement and explains the various offshoots. These include Conservative Judaism, Reconstructionism, Humanistic Judaism and Polydoxy.⁵

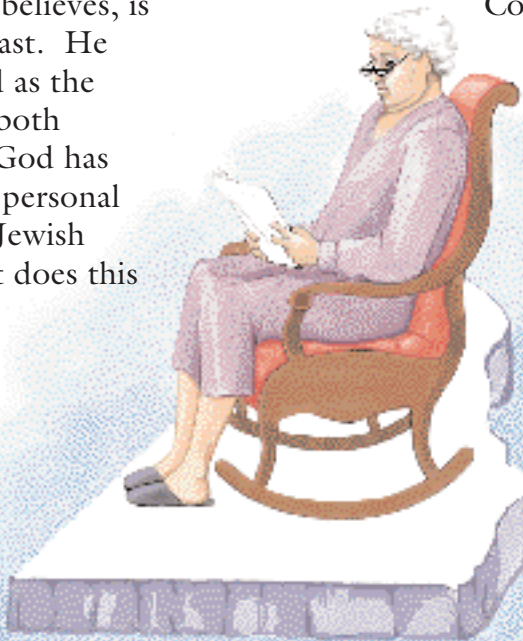
After 150 pages of examining the Jewish past, Cohn-Sherbok spends the remaining two chapters

promoting his own strategy for the future, which he calls Open Judaism. It is rooted in the idea of personal freedom, allowing individuals the ability to choose which parts of Jewish life they find spiritually meaningful. The leaders of the Reform movement, he states, always imposed their new ideas upon others. Open Judaism will do no such thing.

This new ideology borrows much from Reconstructionism, Humanistic Judaism and especially Polydoxy. Perhaps its biggest distinction is that individual beliefs in Open Judaism should always be considered a working hypothesis. This is because, in his view, it is impossible to ever fully know the truth regarding spiritual issues. He explains,

Despite their divergent views, the adherents of Open Judaism should acknowledge that whatever beliefs they hold, there can be no way of demonstrating the correctness of their convictions. This is due to the inevitable subjectivity of religious opinion.⁶

Cohn-Sherbok's subjectivity makes it impossible to actually trust in anything as being objectively true or relevant. Ironically, his strong view against absolute standards is itself a dogma that he asserts as emphatically as any religious doctrine.



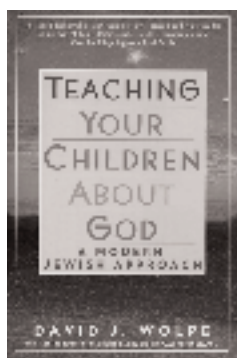
With nothing concrete being passed to the next generation, on what basis would Judaism be able to continue? Cohn-Sherbok does not address this issue.

Open Judaism may be politically correct and in line with many current trends of Jewish individualism. Unfortunately, the tail is wagging the dog. If Judaism presents no absolute truths to adhere to, no standard upon which to claim allegiance, there is no motivation to follow such a lifestyle. If God's role is dismissed, Judaism becomes just a set of societal rules. So why bother being concerned with Jewish survival if its content is dictated merely by changeable human whims?

Teaching Your Children About God

by David J. Wolpe

David Wolpe is a graduate of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America and is currently lecturer in modern Jewish thought at the University of



Judaism in Los Angeles. His two previous books and many lectures concentrate on the importance of God. Rather than focusing upon various options or programs for keeping the Jewish community together, he goes directly to the Almighty, the one who set the Jewish people apart in the first place.

In *Teaching Your Children About God*, he is not only writing for the next generation, but he is also well aware that many of today's Jewish parents are Jewishly illiterate and are equally in need of answers. Each chapter approaches a different issue related to God or religious life and includes exercises to encourage exploration.

To Wolpe, God is not merely part of our heritage or liturgy. Rather, he sees God as the Creator of the universe, still very much alive and the One to be sought on an ongoing basis. Wolpe speaks boldly of God's love for us. He writes,

Central to Judaism is the idea that God loves us. Although we may be unused to the idea, much of Judaism follows from it.⁷

He recognizes that this is a concept that remains foreign to many Jews for two main reasons: first, because many of us were raised in homes where God was rarely mentioned; second, because such language often sounds "too Christian." Wolpe responds

by saying that even if a concept is true in another religion, that does not make it "unJewish." Indeed, he argues, we should be pleased that the basic ideas of our culture are shared by others.

For Wolpe, God's great love for us does not mean that he loves everything we do. Quite the opposite. God's love results in standards, a sense of right and wrong and therefore accountability.

How we treat others does affect God. Unlike too many modern Jewish commentators, Wolpe is not afraid to mention sin:

Teaching children about sin means teaching them that because we are in God's image, what we do has tremendous implications.⁸

Wolpe explains that in Jewish tradition, sin results in distance. When we treat each other cruelly, a wall goes up to cause a separation. The same holds true with our distance from God. But because of God's love, he is always ready to accept our plea for forgiveness. Wolpe sees the necessity of asking both God and the one we have offended for forgiveness.

One thing he fails to explain is the "tremendous implications" of those who remain separated from God (i.e., those who have not repented). This would include the many Jews who remain "unaffiliated," not to mention Jews who are involved in Jewish life but are not sure about God's existence or those who do believe in God but do not acknowledge the reality of sin. The



biblical penalty for sin was severe. Wolpe casually mentions that sin yields “serious implications,” but he then ignores both the urgent need for a remedy as well as the weighty consequences that will result.

He does begin a discussion of the afterlife and acknowledges that it has in the past been a topic of discussion in Jewish literature. He concludes that it is more important to live in this world and not worry so much about the world to come. He sees heaven and hell as affirmations of God’s ultimate justice, rather than as actual places. However, if the negative consequences of sin are not real, where then is the justice? For God’s justice to be relevant, it must include the necessity of wrongs being made right.

Rabbi Wolpe should be applauded for his sincere proclamation of the living God, especially at a time when the thoughts of so many Jewish leaders are turning elsewhere. His desire to know (and have others know) the God of our ancestors is commendable. But the information he is passing along to the next generation is missing a major piece of the puzzle. For Wolpe, God’s supremacy is limited to those who choose to be religious. He does not grapple with the biblical reality of sin. He comes halfway to the truth and thinks he has reached the divinely appointed destination and then gets sidetracked from the remedy of sin and basis of salvation.

Jewish Survival and the Promises of God

The future of Judaism does not depend on human ingenuity or new understandings about who we are. We need to acknowledge that One far above ourselves is responsible for Jewish survival. More than 4,000 years ago, God made a promise to Abraham and his descendants that he would never forsake them. The same promise was reiterated in

the time of the prophet Jeremiah, when God declared,

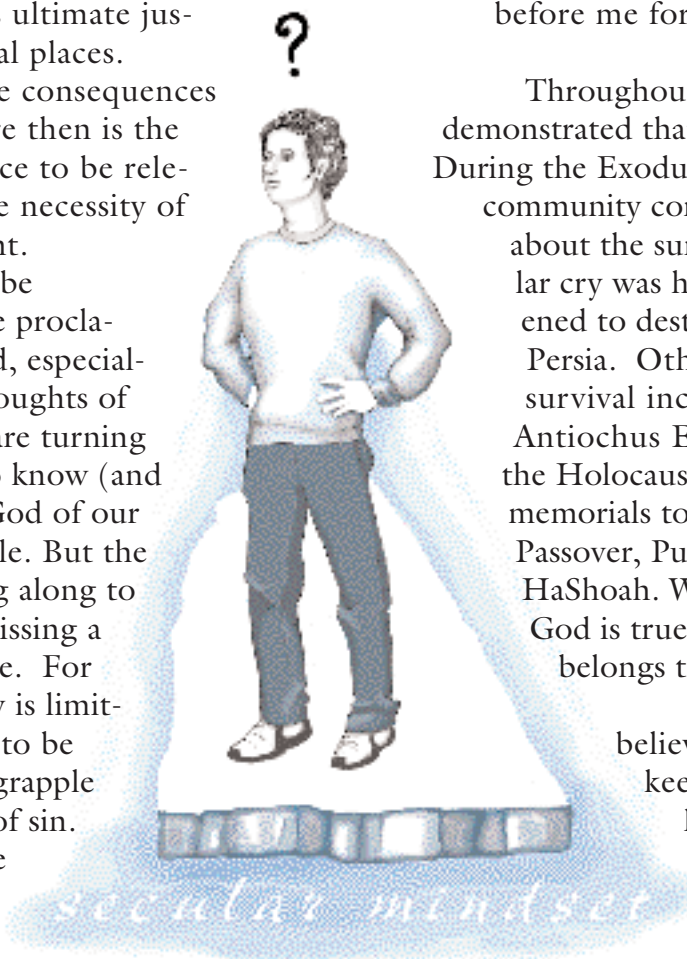
Who giveth the sun for a light by day, and the ordinances of the moon and of the stars for a light by night, who stirreth up the sea, that the waves therefore roar, the Lord of Hosts is His name: If these ordinances depart from before me, saith the Lord, then the seed of Israel shall also cease from being a nation before me forever.⁹

Throughout history, God has clearly demonstrated that he has kept this promise. During the Exodus from Egypt the whole community complained to Moses, worried about the survival of our people. A similar cry was heard when Hamen threatened to destroy the Jewish population of Persia. Other major threats to Jewish survival include the conquest made by Antiochus Epiphane and more recently the Holocaust. And yet we survived. As memorials to these events we observe Passover, Purim, Hanukkah and Yom HaShoah. We have survived because God is true to his word, and the victory belongs to him.

There is every reason to believe that God will continue to keep his promise. This will happen whether “Judaism” takes the shape of Soviet

Atheism or the latest variation of Reconstructionism. Indeed, God’s chosen people have not always been following God’s chosen plan. It is important to distinguish between the people (to whom God promised survival) and the religion, which has been steadily “evolving” from among the leaders. This development has occurred in both orthodox and non-orthodox traditions.

Rabbis Haberman, Cohn-Sherbok and Wolpe reveal some of the latest perspectives from among the many views within Judaism. While some of their ideas may draw criticism (and even contempt) from other Jewish leaders, they will not be considered outside the Jewish fold. This is because their



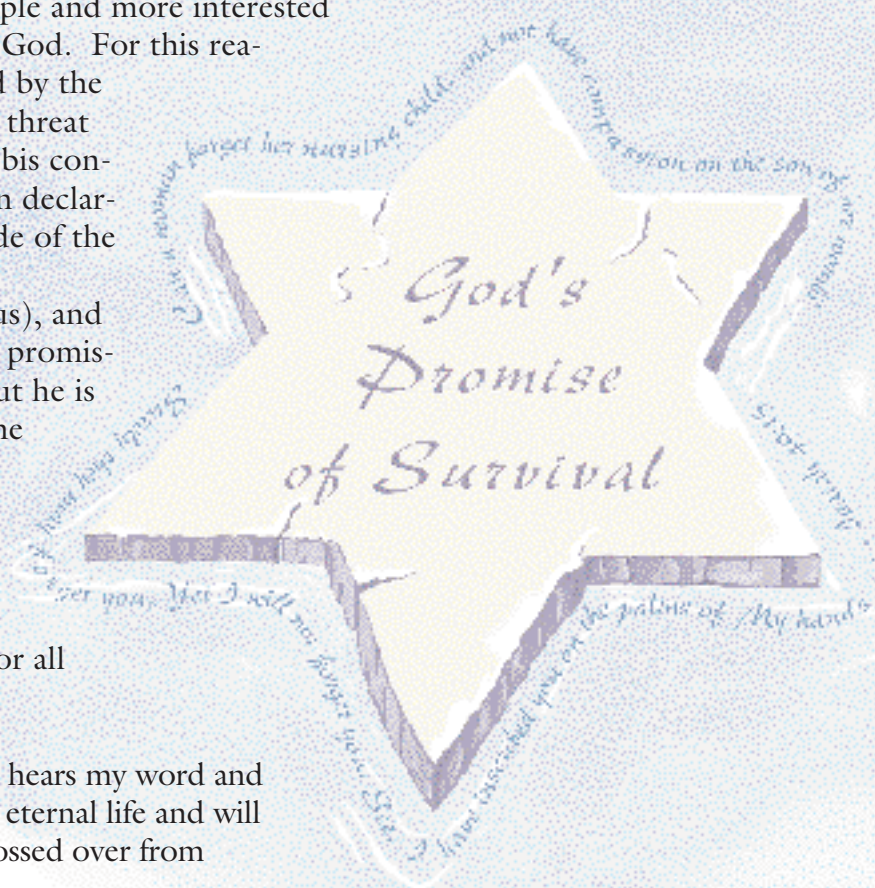
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ultimate concern is the physical survival of the Jewish people. The primacy of this issue has become the litmus test to determine who is in and who is out of the community.

There was one rabbi in Jewish history who was less interested in the religion of the people and more interested in turning individual hearts toward God. For this reason, he was immediately denounced by the other rabbis of his day. He posed a threat to their authority. Today, many rabbis continue to denounce his message, even declaring his Jewish followers to be outside of the fold.

This rabbi is named Y'shua (Jesus), and he, too, is proof that God keeps his promises. He is not only the messenger, but he is also the message. Y'shua fulfilled the role of the expected Messiah as promised by God, and his plan for survival is spiritual rather than physical. He came so that individuals may be freed from sin and enter a relationship with God for all eternity. And that's some future!

“I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life.”¹⁰



Notes

1. Debra Nussbaum and Garth Wolkoff, “Jews are less Jewish than ever, national study finds,” *Northern California Jewish Bulletin*, June 14, 1991, p. 7.
2. Joshua Haberman, *The God I Believe In* (New York: Free Press, 1994), p. 4 (interviewees: Rachel Cowan, Emil Fackenheim, Levi Isaac Horowitz, Louis Jacobs, Steven T. Katz, Norman Lamm, Philip Leder, Yeshayahu Leibowitz, Cynthia Ozick, Arno Penzias, Norman Podhoretz, Chaim Potok, Natan Sharansky, Adin Steinsaltz).
3. *Ibid.*, p. 167.
4. Dan Cohn-Sherbok, *The Future of Judaism*

- (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994), p. x.
5. Polydoxy began in the late 1980s, pioneered by a philosophy professor from Hebrew Union College. It stresses individuality of thought.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 196.
7. David Wolpe, *Teaching Your Children About God* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1993), p. 113.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 135.
9. Jeremiah 31:35, 36 (JPS translation)
10. John 5:24 (NIV)