

ARE WE WITNESSING THE END OF THE ENLIGHTENMENT?¹

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I want to begin by saying how grateful I am for this opportunity to reflect on matters of great importance and deep anxiety for so many of us at this moment, both well-captured in the question posed in such stark terms in the title of this paper: “Are We Witnessing the End of the Enlightenment?”

The question, I think, could usefully be rephrased in these words: Are historians going to look back on this decade as one of wholesale retreat from values of human dignity, thoughtful rationality and tolerance of difference—values that Jews, most other Americans, and many individuals and peoples around the world, have long held dear? Our answer to that question, yours and mine, has got to be “no.” There is too much at stake for Jews and everyone else to permit any other answer. What is more, our resounding “no” cannot remain on the level of speculation or analysis. It has to be translated into action. Jews, and rabbis first of all, have got to remain clear about the demands of the covenant that defines and inspires us, in the face of a frontal challenge to our values that in my view is greater than any we have experienced in the past half-century.

This is not the first challenge posed by America or the modern world to traditional Jewish commitments. Let’s recognize, before addressing the current situation, that there has always been a degree of tension between our covenantal commitments as Jews, and the universalism and individualism prized by Enlightenment. The “disenchantment of the world,” always part and parcel of Enlightenment rationality, does not sit well with Jewish notions of God and what God

¹ This paper is based on my presentation at the panel session “Are We Witnessing the End of the Enlightenment?” at the Rabbinical Assembly Convention in Baltimore, MD on February 27, 2017.

demands of us. Faithful Jews could never accept the banishment of religion from the public square and the relegation of faith to the realm of the emotions. I have been decisively shaped by Max Weber's sociological insight that religion would find its place in the modern world only "in pianissimo," *i.e.*, in small communities, and, by his insistence, likewise in the name of science, that one way or another a person of faith has to "bring his intellectual sacrifice — that is inevitable."²

What is more, we Jews have been among the first to testify that Enlightenment has too often, and for too many people, failed to live up to its redemptive promise, indeed has actually betrayed that promise on far too many occasions. Modern, Western, liberal democracies have tolerated a great deal of suffering and injustice over the past two centuries and still do. As Martin Luther King famously declared, "all men are created equal" was a "promissory note" not yet redeemed. "Instead of honoring this sacred obligation, America has given the Negro people a bad check; a check which has come back marked 'insufficient funds.'"³

Nevertheless: at this time of awful uncertainty and unprecedented change, we need the best of Enlightenment more than ever before. Jews have got to demonstrate in word and deed how and why Enlightenment is a *necessary* condition for the redemptive work to which we are called, even if it is not entirely *sufficient* to that task. We should also draw on the sobriety implanted in us by the long history of Jewish suffering and striving. It is not self-aggrandizement on our part, or inflation of generational self-importance, to say we are living through a moment in the history of our country and the world that is far from ordinary. History may be turning as we speak, and the turn may not be a good one. Simple observation confirms the dimension and rapidity of the transformation occurring right now, even leaving aside the changes in policy and values undertaken by the new administration in Washington.

Consider:

² Max Weber, "Science as a Vocation," in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, ed. H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), p. 155.

³ Martin Luther King, "I Have a Dream (1963)," in *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King Jr.*, ed. James Melvin Washington, (New York: HarperOne, 2006), p. 217.

- Technology is moving too fast for our minds, our ethical traditions, or our navigation of personal relationships to keep up.
- Globalization has brought incalculable benefits to tens of millions of people in America and around the world and, it must be admitted, has caused hardship to tens of millions, whose jobs have moved or disappeared and whose skills are no longer prized.
- The internet has connected people as never before, spread knowledge as never before, brought individuals and ideas together in ways unimaginable only a few years ago—and it has also left many people overwhelmed and lonely as never before. The Jewish Theological Seminary’s faculty learned recently from the head of our counseling center that students at American colleges and universities in a recent survey self-reported emotional health at the lowest rates ever recorded. Forty-eight percent had felt in the past 12 months that “things were hopeless,” over half had felt overwhelming anxiety in that period, and two thirds have coped with serious depression.⁴ One can of course cite numerous statistics that demonstrate improvement in the length and quality of life for millions of individuals in North America and around the world, some of them facilitated or accelerated by the Internet.

It seems undeniable, however, that all is not well in 21st century North America at the apex of Enlightenment. Social theorists have long worried that the breakdown of traditional communities and roles

⁴ American College Health Association. *American College Health Association-National College Health Assessment II: Reference Group Executive Summary Spring 2016* (Hanover, MD: American College Health Association, 2016).

would cast many of us adrift in multiple ways, and it seems that that in fact has occurred.

One cannot conclude this brief survey of the contemporary situation without noting that climate change and global warming have added a whole new level of anxiety to life, one our ancestors never experienced. Educated citizens of the planet walk around these days with the real fear, unless we are in denial, that large portions of the Earth may become uninhabitable within the lifetimes of our children or grandchildren. God's earth requires intelligent stewardship as never before.

Given all those givens, it is hardly surprising that populist and nationalist calls to circle the wagons against so-called outsiders are resurgent and that the claims of reason are suspect. Many individuals in America and elsewhere are understandably disenchanted with disenchantment. Our universities probably did not help matters by casting sophisticated doubt on the existence of facts, looking down on old-fashioned claims to Right and Truth, maintaining that any image or text was as valuable as any other, and encouraging identity politics among their students. Whatever the cause of what is widely seen today as a "crisis in values," we find ourselves in 2017 hearing otherwise: serious people defending the appeal to "alternative facts" and questioning the value of generosity and trust. Even in the best of times, human beings tend to vote their fears and not their hopes, and for many these are not the best of times.

What's a faithful Jew to do at such a moment? What wisdom can Judaism offer the world?

In the interest of brevity and clarity, and in an effort to be concrete rather than abstract, I will focus on three lessons that I think modern Jewish thought offers us at a time of trial for modern Jews and everyone else. None will be unfamiliar to you.

First, as I noted above, we Jews have recognized Enlightenment to be a wonderful instrument for progress on the path to a better world—one that opened doors to Jewish admission and Jewish achievement—but we have always felt that in crucial ways the universalist, individualist and rationalist vision of Enlightenment is inadequate and in need of correction.

For one thing, Enlightenment has too often addressed the mind exclusively, remaining heartless and soulless, and has been blind to human depths where both good and evil dwell. It has tended to focus

on what all human beings allegedly have in common and to give short shrift to precious ways in which we differ from one another. It has spoken eloquently about rights and said too little about responsibilities and obligations. It has privileged empirical evidence and cast doubt on the reality and value of what cannot be proved.

In Moses Mendelssohn's useful terms, Enlightenment—and Enlightenment Judaism—gave us “eternal truths” shared by all, including moral and religious truths, but could not give us “historical truths” or “commandments” distinctive to a particular faith community. Where would Jews be without Passover, or Christians without Easter, or Muslims without Ramadan? Mendelssohn understood that these are not just “rituals” or “holidays,” but frameworks of meaning that sanctify daily existence. Judaism is inconceivable without distinctive commandments and teachings. Without these *mitzvot* (“commandments”), even the most eternal of truths lose their force, and cannot compete with urges, temptations, consumer goods or politicians that come our way backed by billions of dollars in advertising.⁵

Mendelssohn made that case as a partisan of Enlightenment, not a foe. The matter at hand does not lend itself to a simple “yes” or “no.” The great modern story of liberation is a *true* story—for all that it has left too many people out or left them behind. The oft-told narrative of individuals happily freed from the deadening constraints of traditional beliefs and communities is likewise true; the move from small towns to big cities, from places where everyone knows you too well to shifting landscapes in which few know even your name has been good for millions of souls as well as bodies; the opening of doors to groups long kept down and out—women, gays and lesbians, people of color, minorities of all sorts, including Jews—has brought real blessing. I am here, bearing the privileges and education that have made me who I am, because my grandparents made the move from Eastern Europe to America, my parents then took full advantage of the opportunities America offered, and those doors in turn opened others to me. I will always be grateful to America as well as to my family ancestors. A lot of the credit for my personal happiness goes to the forces and ideas we call Enlightenment.

⁵ Moses Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem or On Religious Power and Judaism*, ed. Alexander Altman (Hanover: University of New England, 1986).

But Jews and others, religious thinkers as well as social theorists, have long recognized that something was lost as well as gained in this transition. Rabbi Soloveitchik would say that “Adam I” — the human being of control and majesty, of PhDs and complex institutions, the Adam that flies in jet planes and cures cancer — did very well in this move to modernity. But “Adam II” — the human being that makes long-term commitments to other people and to God, the Adam that falls in love and enacts love in enduring relations and commitments — that Adam has been shunted to one side.⁶ Buber called this the triumph of I-It over I-Thou relationships.⁷ Heschel wrote that the clamor of acquisitiveness, the realm of space, had drowned out the call to the Ineffable, and led us astray from the sacredness of time.⁸

We’ve all experienced this loss to some extent, I’d wager, and have valued Judaism for helping us to overcome it. Conservative Jews have staked their lives on the ability to live in the world of Enlightenment and still have Shabbat and Torah; indeed we believe it is *thanks* to Shabbat and Torah that we are able to thrive in the modern world. We have embraced rather than rejected that world, or built high walls to protect ourselves from it, or strategized on how to wait it out.

To me, this stance — definitional of Conservative Judaism — is what Torah wants, now as ever. *Parashat Mishpatim* is clear that it wants the high ethical principles of Sinai — as universal a moral code as has ever been propounded — translated into concrete laws governing daily human interactions. The “holiness code” of Leviticus uses Sabbath observance and other “ritual” laws as the basis for a far-reaching attempt at societal transformation. Taking on the yoke of the kingdom of heaven, to Deuteronomy, means giving God all the heart and mind, all one’s soul, all one’s might. The rabbis seconded and expanded the notion of holiness in action. Maimonides made it central to the *Mishneh Torah* and the *Guide for the Perplexed*. I think this quintessentially Jewish notion of religious responsibility to the world has a lot to teach members of other faiths and the increasing number

⁶ Joseph Dov Soloveitchik, *The Lonely Man of Faith* (New Milford, CT: Maggid Books, 2012).

⁷ Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Touchstone, 1971).

⁸ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Man is Not Alone: A Philosophy of Religion* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1976); *Ibid.*, *The Sabbath: Its Meaning for Modern Man* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005).

of North Americans who have joined the “nones” where religion is concerned. The synthesis of Enlightenment universalism and particularist loyalties for which we stand has the potential to resonate far beyond the borders of our community.

The second lesson that modern Jewish thought brings to the present situation addresses the question of how that balance of particular and universal can reach into daily life and shape institutions and personal relationships alike.

Covenant—a central notion of Judaism, arguably *the* central notion—forms and commands a “kingdom of priests” and a “holy nation;” it is all about both “capital C Community” and “Meaning with a capital M.” I call these the Kaplanian and Heschelian dimensions of Conservative Jewish thought, respectively, thereby giving credit to the two giants who walked the halls of JTS together for two decades and prowl the corridors of my mind together virtually every day.

Judaism commands us to build communities characterized by face-to-face relations, and sees the Jewish people—the *mamlekheth kohanim* (“kingdom of priests”) and *goy kadosh* (“holy nation”) formed at Sinai; the group that joins together to build a *mishkan* (“tabernacle”) that enables God to dwell in their midst—as a network of such communities. Kaplan well understood that America has provided Jews greater space than any previous diaspora to thrive via the building of a voluntarist Jewish community comprised of many hundreds of local communities. Other diaspora Jewries (and other religious groups) are learning from our experience, and Israelis too have recognized of late that the State is no substitute for voluntarist face-to-face *kehillot*: too distant, too bureaucratic, and too coercive to play that role. Communities, precisely because they consist of personal relations, bind us up in shared projects, shared celebrations and shared grief. They affirm and reaffirm that every member of the community is known, valued, needed. They teach via experience that differences of politics and generation needed not stand in the way of cooperation and mutual respect. They provide safe home bases from which one can go forth, individually and in groups, to work in the larger, ever-contentious world.

A lot of work has been done in recent years by Robert Putnam and others to resurrect and strengthen local communities in America

in the face of the breakdown of neighborhoods and cities.⁹ Reduction of crime in our cities depends on such efforts. So does improvement in our schools. Religious institutions remain a key venue for cooperation across religious boundaries—and that cooperation is ever harder as fewer Americans join any organization, religious or fraternal or the local PTA. Jewish thinkers have made eloquent arguments on behalf of religious pluralism and cooperation, and Jewish institutions have for good reason led the way in partnership and dialogue. They have demonstrated the need for and possibility of local institutions that stand between individuals on the one hand and the state on the other.

For millions of Jews, these communities are a source of Meaning with a capital M. We pour tens and hundreds of millions of dollars into providing the members of our community—especially when they are young—with experiences of community permeated with the Meaning of Jewish tradition. I need not say more about this matter to members of the Rabbinical Assembly. We know the life-changing impact of Ramah, of United Synagogue Youth, of day schools, of Israel experiences, of vital synagogues and their schools. We know what it means to go through life with a community of capital M Meaning, and face up to illness and death with the support of such a community. The deep satisfaction of singing “*etz chayyim hi*” (“it is a tree of life”) as we return the Torah to the ark is not just a function of the music, or the power of shared voices. The words conjure up gratitude at the life that Torah makes possible for us. We cannot imagine living without this Torah. We gratefully choose to walk these paths of peace again and again.

Heschel is for me the thinker who most successfully captured the full import of that Meaning, because he provided the example, in his books and in his activism, of piety and learning expressed in courageous social and political involvement. The latter in turn provided greater significance to the piety and the learning for him and for us. As I think about Jews and others in North America joining together to address the awesome problems we face today, I am encouraged by the fact that Heschel is known to and respected by many non-Jews, and increasingly known to and respected in Israel,

⁹ Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2002); Robert D. Putnam, Lewis M. Feldstein and Don Cohen, *Better Together: Restoring the American Community* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2009).

even by Orthodox Jews, who read his works purged of any reference to his association with JTS. Heschel convincingly described a way of being loyal to our covenant and our God despite – indeed, because – we Jews join with other faith communities to do good in the world. The world has to know that faith does not mean intolerance, let alone terror; it has to see people of good will, members of strong communities, believers in Meaning with a capital M, working together and not letting anyone split us apart.¹⁰

I will close with the words of a Conservative thinker who is rarely quoted these days, one to whom I have developed special appreciation over the last ten years because he invented the title and job description I now hold. Louis Finkelstein's writings lack the sociological penetration of Kaplan's work and the lyricism of Heschel's, but I am confident that Finkelstein too would have urged members of the Rabbinical Assembly to reclaim the priestly obligation to pronounce the difference between *tamei* (impure) and *tahor* (pure), even while ministering to communities struggling under the weight of anxiety and division. I think he'd urge that there be more and not fewer prophetic reminders of what we Jews stand for, at a time when the President of the United States is personally challenging central values of the Judeo-Christian tradition as well as policies that have long enjoyed the support of both major parties. I believe that Finkelstein, if he were here, would have given voice to the moral claims of Judaism, something rabbis *must* do, a task not at all the same as mounting political campaigns or serving one political party.

I say all this because I have spent a lot of time lately reading Finkelstein's writings. Let me share two of them, among the most sociologically astute and poetically powerful speeches that he delivered.

Ninety years ago, in a speech to the Rabbinical Assembly, Finkelstein said the following: "Our love for the Torah is only in part rationalistic; in the main, we need not be ashamed to confess it, it is emotional, intuitive and mystic." Those words came right after he declared that

¹⁰ Abraham Joshua Heschel, "No Religion is an Island," in *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity*, ed. Susannah Heschel (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1996).

we are drawn to the Torah with the bonds of love for it and for its norms. We love its ceremonies, its commandments, its rules, and its spirit... and we feel that it would be a betrayal of [our ancestors] to yield in our adhesion to it now when we have at last attained freedom and emancipation.

I will conclude with these words delivered eighty years ago at a celebration marking JTS' 50th anniversary:

We, therefore, accept Judaism as a system of justice, but as a justice which, far from being blind, is very clear-sighted. To do this is to change Judaism from an ossified museum piece into a living and vital tradition. The Code of Hammurabi can rest unchanged in the Louvre. The Torah endures in human life and must partake of the vitality, the adaptability and fluidity of all living organisms... The call comes to us as it did to Isaiah: "Whom shall I send?" Certainly the answer which each of us will make, will be... "Here am I; send me!"¹¹

This moment of challenge is not one in which Jews should condone, let alone bless, the end of Enlightenment. It is rather one to stand with determination for the balance of reason, passion, social responsibility and faith to which we have always been called. With God's help we will see our way, and help our country, to better days.

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¹¹ Louis Finkelstein, "Tradition in the Making," in *Tradition and Change: The Development of Conservative Judaism* (New York: Burning Bush Press, 1970), pp. 194 and 197.

and values on his blog, [On My Mind: Arnie Eisen](#). His books include *Taking Hold of Torah: Jewish Commitment and Community in America* (Bloomington: Indiana: University Press, 1997); *Conservative Judaism Today and Tomorrow* (New York: JTS Kazis Family, 2015); and, with Steven M. Cohen, *The Jew Within: Self, Family, and Community in America* (Indiana University Press, 2000).

