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## **Book Review: 'Guideposts in Modern Judaism' by Jacob B. Agus**

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## Jacob B. Agus: GUIDEPOSTS IN MODERN JUDAISM \*

JEWISH survival in America may not be taken for granted." This is the warning of Rabbi Jacob B. Agus in his *Guideposts*, a volume of his essays collected for the American Jewish Tercentenary in 1954. He feels, therefore, the need to outline the attitudes he thinks should shape the American Jewish community in years to come. It is as a man at home both with the language of rabbinic culture and the hardly less formalized idiom of contemporary philosophy that he, a leading Conservative rabbi of Baltimore, writes. His tool is reason, operating in the open forum of universal experience; neither "illumination" nor "mystical wonderment" seem to him suitable for marshaling the forces which will secure the Jewish future. But before looking to the future, he sketches American Judaism as it is today, and in this performs a service so useful, at least to the non-Jewish reader, that I think I should be reporter before I turn reviewer, difficult though it is further to compress some 120 tightly packed pages.

If any section of Jewish life might be expected by a Christian to be a uniform block, surely it is the Orthodox. Yet Rabbi Agus has to differentiate, within the "Orthodox stream," four main currents, each patient of infinite subdivision, and each represented in the United States. There is the *musar* movement. When *haskalah*, the secularistic Enlightenment of the last century, and with it revolutionary enthusiasms, began making serious inroads among Jewish intellectuals of eastern Europe, the ideal of a "holy community" seemed shattered. In reaction to this breakdown, the *musar* movement aimed at the formation of an elite of learned and saintly individuals by persistent ethical self-criticism. Not reason, not the triumphant dialectic of the apologete, but awe and love are the sources of the religious energy of the *musar*-man, the "disciplined," "ethical" man. In the presence of the Holy One, the original *musar*-man trembles, mindful of his sins and failures, mindful of judgment. "You are young men, and you have felt perplexed only for a short time," said the aged Rabbi Blaser to a group of rabbinical students. "I have been lost for a long, long time. Let us cry together. Perhaps the Almighty will help us."

\* New York: Bloch Publishing Co., 1954.

Another tendency in the *musar* movement, to become more influential than the first in the United States, relies on the more benign dynamism of love and aspiration to produce a man of serene perfection rather than his trembling and anxious brother. It teaches peace and imperturbability of spirit, to be attained by constant reflection, "the key to wisdom, the focus of all the faculties." This stress on reflection has led to metaphysical speculation, not in terms of contemporary secularized philosophy, but in the framework of the Kabbalah, the system of theosophy which sees the world as an emanation from God and sensible realities as but shadows of higher realities, and which therefore regards every word, letter, number, and accent of holy Scripture as filled with hidden meaning. In the universe of the Kabbalah, no frontier divides the natural from the supernatural, miracles are routine, and the past is idealized to such an extent that its ordinary men and women are imagined to have known the mystical links between the lower and higher worlds.

Between the *musar* movement, so radically other-worldly, and an Orthodoxy which has achieved a maximum accommodation to Western speculation may be located two other currents: the complex of ideas promulgated by Rabbi Kuk, the late Chief Rabbi of Palestine, and that expounded by Rabbi Soloveitchik, professor of Talmud and Religious Philosophy at Yeshiva University, New York. Rabbi Kuk, whom Dr. Agus considers the real heir of the great mystical tradition of Hasidism, derived from his own mystical experiences, the author tells us, the conception that the world, although one, presents two faces to man. There is the happy side of the universe, God-centered and beneficently ordered by Torah; it is the side of faith. But doubt sees a melancholy side, the side of moral disorder, of meaninglessness, of frustration. Through this contradiction the mystic penetrates; he is joyously lifted by the love that comes from God, so that he glimpses the truth in its depth and healing power; his is "the view of all things together." Kabbalah had its role in the development of Rabbi Kuk's ideas, but he did not reject the conceptions of a more secular philosophy nor the literally down-to-earth ideals of Zionism. Indeed, he "advanced at times," in Rabbi Agus's revealing phrase, to the intellectual position of Conservatism, as when he found that even the secular achievements of the Jewish people constituted Torah, holy teaching.

For Rabbi Soloveitchik, *halakah*, traditional Jewish Law, corresponds to the fundamental structure of man. Founded on revelation, the Law needs no secular scaffolding, no validation from outside. Kierkegaard is right about Abraham, he holds: not even the best ordered reason has anything to tell the man of true faith. Abraham's trial on Mount Moriah

was not to teach him that God desired no human sacrifice (the general Jewish interpretation), but that God's thought and will are incommensurate with man's. All of the Law—that given on Sinai and that hammered out in later ages—is of divine origin. There is no room in the life of the Halakist, we are told, for anxieties, for warfare against the flesh, for the vagaries of religious "feeling." The Law gives him mastery over all these. Restrained though the man of *halakah* is, nonetheless, in the words of Rabbi Soloveitchik, "every person is called upon to renew his being in accord with the ideal pattern of the prophet" in order that the divine Presence may rest upon him.

The fourth grouping within American Orthodox opinion (small at present but likely to grow in numbers and importance) proceeds under the sign of an alliance with Western intellectual influences. In it there is no longer to be found that unsophisticated, spontaneous devotion which marks the Orthodoxy rooted in the East. Sometimes termed Jewish "neo-Orthodoxy," it must not be likened to Protestant neo-orthodox opinion; it is as fundamentalist as the other Orthodox traditions. The most recent expression of this type of Orthodoxy is Isaak Breuer's *Der Neue Kusari*, an effort, on the eve of the Nazi deluge, to synthesize three elements: a profound conviction of the inadequacy of mere human reason, the idealism classic in certain German philosophic circles, and the persuasion that the Law is the only salvation for mankind. The surging, restless world of experience, the physical world of inexorable causal relations, is a construct, Breuer contends. It is the product of the noumenal realm (which he calls "meta-physical"), but only as ordered by a subconscious will, common to all men (which he terms the "meta-ethical" aspect of the human personality). Inaccessible to rational analysis, the "meta-ethical" is manifested both in our anxiety and in the decision which alone conquers anxiety. Hence ultimate knowledge is not the business of intellect but of the inner will of man, and the ultimate truth which is Torah cannot be submitted to the methods of rational demonstration. And the Jewish people? They are the "meta-historical" reality. As the "meta-physical" and the "meta-ethical" constitute the really real behind all phenomena, so it is the role of the authentic Jew, says Breuer, to stand beyond the aspirations for power and the groping wisdom of the nations, beyond their ever frustrated efforts to conquer evil. His role is to show all mankind the ultimate answer to the tragedy of human living. That answer is detailed, concrete, precise: it is Torah, the pattern of the kingdom of God. If the Jewish people are a minority, scattered among the nations, this is because their destiny makes them "the people of peoples," men who "learn to love and cherish the pe-



culiar characteristics of each nation." It goes without saying that, in this perspective, Zionism is a betrayal of, a rebellion against, the "meta-historical" function which is the duty and the glory of the Jew, a deliberate reduction of what ought to stand beyond the shifting façade of history to the status of another temporal nation: competing, unstable, merely equal.

If Orthodoxy in every form dramatically emphasizes the separation of Jew from non-Jew, another tendency in American Judaism has been to attempt a reconciliation with the spirit of time and place as thoroughgoing as possible—indeed its critics will complain that it goes beyond what is possible. This is the Reform movement, with its Central Conference of American Rabbis, its Union of American Hebrew Congregations, and its Hebrew Union College. Originating especially in Germany and Hungary, where a strong effort was made to weld together progressive cultural elements with whatever must be retained if Judaism is to be an intelligible reality, this movement was peculiarly well adapted to certain requirements of the American scene during the second half of the nineteenth century. To begin with, it provided the more cosmopolitan Jews of German and Hungarian origin with an ideological and even a theological basis for their very real cultural difference from the Orthodox Polish and Russian immigrants who were so little at home in the new world. Second, in a century when necessary progress enjoyed the status of a self-evident truth, Reform theology was ready to explain that Judaism is an essentially progressive religion, able and even eager to jettison whatever might be found inconsistent with the spirit of the times. It was eager (in the days of its youth) to transfer the Sabbath services to Sunday, to replace Bar Mitzvah by "Confirmation," to have a Jewish school give lessons in German but abandon Hebrew. The Reform leaders looked on themselves as the vanguard of the entire Jewish community and firmly hoped that their program would become "*minhag America*," "the American form of Judaism." Although the Mosaic Law is considered by Reform theology to express perennial moral values, traditional ceremonies are retained only on condition that they conform to contemporary habits and aspirations. Judaism, in short, is, to the Reform rabbis, what some liberal Protestant theologians had reproached it for failing to be: a religion of progressive perfection, careless of ritualistic law, dedicated to making this world a better place, burdened with no degrading dependence on hell and paradise to buttress the conviction that virtue is its own reward and that the human spirit is immortal because it is "divine." Though during the nineteenth century Zionism was an eminently academic issue, Reform Judaism roundly condemned it as a survival of unprogressive nationalism—this, at any

rate, was the Reform Judaism of the celebrated "Pittsburgh Platform" of 1885.

And today? The "Columbus Platform of Guiding Principles" adopted in 1937 made some adjustments to the spirit of still another time. While not urging American Jews to settle in Palestine, it affirmed the "obligation of all Jewry" to aid in the building of a homeland. Furthermore, the Columbus Conference marked an attempt to emphasize the continuity of Jewish tradition by searching in the medieval literature of *halakah* for the sources of present-day practice. However, this practice varies so much from congregation to congregation that it is impossible to record it here. At Columbus, the "progressive" character of Reform Judaism was maintained, while avoiding the brutal rupture with past ages implied in the sweeping disclaimers of the Pittsburgh Platform. Perhaps no one has better expressed the religious philosophy of Reform than the venerable survivor of Theresienstadt, Rabbi Leo S. Baeck, who calls the essence of Judaism an "ethical dynamism." The divine challenge "thou shalt," he says, is the full and fundamental reality, the great hope. Revelation, moral duty, and promise are here one; this is "the Torah, which, according to ancient simile, was 'before the creation of the world.'"

A third major grouping within the framework of Jewish faith and practice in the United States is the Conservative movement. It is to be understood, Rabbi Agus tells us, as a kind of golden mean between two extremes: the fundamentalism and literalism of all forms of Orthodoxy, and the willingness of Reform to sacrifice the integrity of *halakah* to the exigencies of time and place. Rejecting the intransigent devotion of Orthodoxy to the interpretations of the Law made by the courts and rabbis of the past, a Conservative thinker defends rather the authority of the rabbi or court of our own day: else, he fears, law and life will lose their dynamic contact. For him, the ultimate authority shifts from the dead letter to the living people. The people speaks, for the Conservative ideology, through a Committee on Jewish Law and Standards. In this way, the Conservative reasons, a chaotic, every-man-for-himself subjectivism is avoided, but so is rigidity and standstill. In the interest of "strengthening the faith," therefore, the letter of the Law may undergo progressive modification—the dietary laws be obligatory, for example, only at public synagogue functions, and literal Sabbath observances modified as necessity may dictate. The Bas Mitzvah for girls complementing the Bar Mitzvah for boys, and a Consecration ceremony for children about to enter Hebrew school, are instances of "the search for new vehicles of religious expression." Yet the Conservative is committed to the whole Jewish tradition. Rabbi Agus is fond of quoting the paraphrase "nothing



Jewish is alien to me." Hence the tendency, indeed the policy, of Reform to dispense with those practices and beliefs which single out the Jews: to drop Hebrew, in the name of a shallow rationalism to maintain only the moral prescriptions of the Mosaic code, and to make no room for mysticism—all this seems to the Conservative a wanton squandering of riches amassed through centuries of creative effort.

The mediating character of Conservatism is exhibited also in its genesis. Although the movement was already well defined in Europe before it appeared on the American scene, here it only reluctantly disassociated itself from Reform. Its original intention had been to heal the wounds of disunity which divided American Judaism into an Orthodoxy represented chiefly by new immigrants from eastern Europe and the Reform movement based on the more urbane representatives of German and central European Judaism. The Conservative thinkers had consequently set themselves a double task: to bring to the Orthodox a "culture" which would complement their religious devotion and at the same time to provide the Reform movement with a demonstration of fidelity to the integral tradition of *halakah* without the sacrifice of legitimate cultural aspirations. But the Orthodox are still Orthodox, and the Pittsburgh Platform revealed what an abyss separates Reform from Conservative ideology. Hence an effort to transcend sectarian division has resulted in the formation of a third force with its own explanations and its own institutions—chief among these last the Jewish Theological Seminary, the United Synagogue, and the Rabbinical Assembly.

No narrow set of principles, Conservatism is nonetheless fairly easy to identify. A merely literal interpretation of revelation is rejected. Revelation is continuous, containing the eternal under a temporal, human envelope; the continuing task of Judaism is to disengage one from the other and to pay divine honors only to the former. The past is not to be worshipped, but its achievements are to be preserved with humility and love; the present is the extension of that past, and Torah is still in the making. Ritual and symbol, so little valued by Reform, truly "strengthen the faith," and the insights of depth psychology and social anthropology are considered to confirm the practice of the Conservative synagogue. Both rationalism and mysticism find their place in this "open" conception of Judaism, for rationalism alone is incapable of a full appreciation of the holy, but it plays an indispensable role in the bewilderingly exact network of reasoned interpretation which adjusts the ancient formulae of the Law to each new ethical problem and circumstance. The Law itself, in its exquisite balance, justifies the rational, the sober, the measured. Even for the Conservative thinker, who does not

regard Sinai as a "once-for-all" revelation of an eternally fixed law, Judaism remains a religion which necessarily tends to lawfulness as its final goal. But lest a spirit of mere legalism vitiate faith, the values of mysticism are welcomed and cultivated. It is enough to mention the names of Martin Buber and Abraham Heschel to realize what place of honor the traditions of mystical piety hold within the Conservative pattern.

Contemporary "existentialism" has found a place in this mosaic. Judaism is to be reduced neither to a system of abstract thought, nor to a blueprint of legal prescriptions, nor to Zionist patriotism: it is, for the Jewish existentialist, the vital and dynamic contact between God and the human person. The two meet in the context of space and time, a phantasmagoria which masks three ultimate realities: God, man, world. The contact of God and man is revelation; of God and the world, creation; of man and the world, redemption. On the part of God, the act of grace; on the part of man, the leap of faith; the whole people of Israel owes its entity to such a temporal-eternal experience with God, and this is revelation.

Within the framework of Conservatism, the Reconstructionist Fellowship is a kind of "left wing." This movement hopes to "reconstruct" the divisions of American Jewry into an "organic community," a unity in diversity comparable to that which has succeeded so brilliantly in certain modern nations. It would be the maximum development of the "people" in the Conservative triad: God, Torah, and People. Faith is pre-eminent in the ethos of this people, but it is only one of many cultural elements which conspire in its formation, and the exponents of Reconstruction have not always spoken of Judaism as a *religious* civilization. The intention of this tendency within the Conservative movement is to bring to full fruition the dynamics implicit in the "we-feeling" of the Jewish people, and it is maintained that religion is a consequence rather than a cause of that fundamental group-consciousness. The theology of Reconstructionism is liberal to the extreme. The ineffable God is conceived as "a process that makes for salvation" rather than as a Person; He becomes "what the world means to the man who believes in the possibility of maximum life and strives for it." This, it must be noted, is not the dominant view of Conservatives; characteristic of them, Rabbi Agus holds, is faith in a personal God and the ineluctable belief that the Jewish people is in a unique way the carrier of revelation through its total tradition.

Such is American Judaism in the view of a distinguished Conservative rabbi, who is convinced that it is something new—more, that its history



is only now beginning. In this fluid situation he sees both dangers and opportunities; a future of unsuspected achievement or one of profound disappointment may flow from the choices made by this generation. By his *Guideposts*, Rabbi Agus hopes to help guide that choosing.

Perhaps because Rabbi Agus is not only a rabbi, but also a trained philosopher, he has presented his problem as a search for unity in diversity. According to him, Judaism, with perhaps one exception at the end of the Middle Ages, has never been "monolithic in thought" (p. 349). On the contrary, it is extremely varied; it carries in its sweep the debris of many storms, the flotsam of the centuries; a random wealth eddies on its surface. And yet, for him, Judaism in its deepest reality is *one* thing; he will not refuse to propose *the* Jewish solution to the problems of the immediate future. If this requires that he speak out roundly against competing Jewish solutions, his love for everything Jewish does not deter him from that duty. He is sure the Orthodox are wrong: to him they are "literalists" (p. 322). This does not mean that the men of Reform fare any better. They are wrong to propose a "mission" theory—that the Jews have been dispersed all over the earth to diffuse the principles of "ethical monotheism"—as justification for efforts to guarantee Jewish survival and as a consolation for the diaspora (p. 150). Rabbi Agus has other goals for Judaism:

While the first approach subjects the living Jews of today to the mores of the past, the second approach is a frank acceptance of the caprices and confusions of the momentary present, "the idols of the market-place." Our own approach is to orient Jewish life in terms of the future—the state of affairs we should like to bring about. Accordingly, our basic question is: What can Judaism do for the individual Jew of the future? Or, what function can it fulfill in his life? (p. 158)

Thus, to Rabbi Agus in one mood, at least, Judaism seems to have no goal other than the Jew. Faith itself is measured by the requirements of the individual:

Faith in God is sterile if it is not conceived in terms of faith in man. Religious Jews cannot succumb to a paganism that exalts God in the heavens but conceives man on earth as little better than the beasts of the field. If we failed to build our lives on the cornerstone of faith in our fellowmen, we would deny ourself [*sic*] as both Jews and Americans (p. 170).

The paganism at issue here is not, of course, one dedicated to Odin or to Aphrodite. "From the Jewish viewpoint, Christianity partakes of the qualities of paganism and mythology" (p. 422), writes Dr. Agus. Apart from the disappointment at seeing so learned a rabbi confuse mystery with myth, I cannot help the marginal comment that the characteristic pagan attitude would seem to be that which makes man the measure of all things, makes of religion a device for human purposes, creates a divinity designed to reflect man's aspirations. Would it not seem, then, that Rabbi Agus's concept of Judaism, rather than Christianity, partakes of pagan qualities?

But no matter how much religion may be centered on man and his needs, religion bespeaks a conception of God, and to explore it is, for Rabbi Agus, the task of one of the two pillars of Judaism, reason or revelation. His choice is made without hesitation: it is reason, "the only highway of progress open to man" (p. 231), which must guide us to God, and logical reason at that, although he will not deny a role to what Lévy-Bruhl would term the "pre-logical" approaches of aesthetic and moral feeling. Hence his appeal to what he terms the "most fundamental principles of thought, as these have been formulated in our time" (p. 229): the principle of causality and the principle of polarity. Morris R. Cohen's theory of polarity, which Rabbi Agus follows, is this: The universe is a tension of opposites, of "poles," which are directions rather than states or qualities, so that "the whole is mind as well as matter; purposiveness . . . as well as mechanism . . . ; life as well as death; God as well as nature" (p. 240). Moreover, the poles of any given relation are not homogeneous to each other: one functions as a "point" and the other as a "field"—the pattern of infinite relations to which every point is subject. Neither point nor field exist in themselves, but every existent is an expression of a polar tension between some point and its field. Now, each field in turn can be considered a point with respect to the greater field within which it is located. Scientific experience with lesser relations encourages us to extrapolate to infinity this rising scale of being.

Space forbids the discussion of this theory, as it forbids me to discuss, among other things, Rabbi Agus's interpretation of Kant (pp. 255–256) or of Simone Weil (p. 422), or what he calls "the creative orchestration of Jewish and Christian traditions" (p. 222). But I have to draw attention to the result of his use of the theory of polarity. The

personal God who is both immanent and transcendent, both near and far (p. 269), receives new names. The Ineffable has become the "Self of the Universe" (p. 254), the "Field-Builder" (p. 252), the "Divine Pole of being" (p. 256). I shall not be thought irreverent if I suggest that the new divine names would not demand that the high priest enter solemnly, once yearly, into the Holy of Holies before he pronounces them. Indeed, I wonder whether Rabbi Agus expresses an authentic conception of the God who is personal, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, when he says: "In our view, God is conceived as the Pole of Absolute, Ideal Personality in the back and forth flux of the multiple processes of reality, and the love of Him as the highest peak of the Divine process in the heart of man" (p. 334).

In the presence of this account of contemporary American Judaism and of what one Conservative rabbi would like it to become, it is clear that its unity is rather tenuous. If their present situation finds American Jews without a sure road, will Rabbi Agus's "guideposts" safeguard them on their journey? The Torah is described by him as a law because human beings have bound themselves to accept it (p. 134). But, surely, it is the Jewish way to say "Amen" to nothing but the Law that is God's. And the God of Torah—He told the Jews of old His mysterious name, and that name has been the object of a loving and reverent speculation from that day to this. Philosophers have been persuaded that in this revelation they had a hint as to the rational analysis of all that is real; prophets and saints have found in it an enduring food for their souls. While I must grant that it is "modern" to call God the "Field-Builder," I cannot think that Exodus 3:14 is obsolete. I find it hard to escape the painful impression that although Dr. Agus has mastered the language of contemporary philosophy, somehow the accents of biblical faith are missing. But the affection I have for him as a Jew and the respect I gladly owe him as a rabbi make me pray that my impression is wrong.

EDWARD A. SYNAN