



My Orthodox colleagues like to speak of their particular brand of Orthodoxy as the one and only authentic Judaism. They seem to be using the term authentic as it is used in the furniture trade, meaning that a piece of furniture was made in a certain age or period and is not a later imitation or improvement. The criterion of authenticity is age. But can you use such a criterion about a human being or a society or a religion.

A child grows, develops and matures. When is he most authentic? as an infant? a teenager? a father? a grandfather? So too with a religion, in order to survive it must grow and develop in order to meet the challenge of changing conditions. If it fails to change and grow it will ossify and become a fossil. Yet there are those who would like to imagine that there is only one authentic form of Jewish expression, that which has come down to us from the East European shtetl or wherever it is that our great grandparents came from. Now we might ask, is that historically correct? Has there always been only one authentic form of Judaism the same today as in ancient times? Or has there been more than one valid form of Judaism?

Indeed, this same question is being put by one section of orthodoxy to all the others. A few years ago I heard the head of the local Beth Din declare that Orthodoxy was the authentic Judaism. In front of him sat the rabbi of one of the larger Orthodox congregations who questioned the authenticity of his Beth Din. He refused to eat the meat slaughtered under the authority of the local Beth Din and imported his meat from Johannesburg. But in Johannesburg there were 3 competing Shechitah Boards to supervise the slaughter of Kosher meat, each claiming to represent the only really authentic Orthodoxy.

There was the Shechita Board of the Chief Rabbi, whose authenticity was challenged by the Lubavitch who had their own Shechita Board. Then there was the German Orthodox community which felt that the other two were not quite kosher enough, so they set up their own Shechita Board as well.

In Israel they are blessed with two chief rabbis - Ashkenazi and Sephardi - two communities with different customs and traditions. Each regards itself a bit more authentic than the other. Then there are still others, Aguda, Shas, Lubavitch, Neturei Karta, etc. who regard even the chief rabbinate as not quite kosher, and also question each other's bona fides. They are all playing the authenticity game. How can you decide which is the more authentically Jewish? These are not new questions. They have been raised in one way or another in every generation.

Perhaps the first confrontation between two types of Judaism, each claiming to be more authentic than the other, took place 2 643 years ago. It happened at the New Year Festival in the Temple of Beth El in the year 751 BCE. It had been a good year, peaceful and prosperous. Under the strong and vigorous rule of King Jeroboam II the boundaries of Israel had been extended to their farthestmost limits. Trade had flourished and wealth accumulated. Large houses were being built with luxurious appointments and lovely gardens.

To be sure, not all shared equally in the growing prosperity. There were the small farmers who had lost their land through the foreclosure of mortgages, and many had been reduced to serfdom by the large landowners. There were poor debtors sold into slavery for trifling sums by the avarice of the moneylenders. There was the hunger and the misery of the landless peasants, driven out by take-over bids to make room for the large estates of the wealthy and the powerful. But that was the way of the world. The strong go up and the weak go down.

The well fed throng that gathered in their festive garments to celebrate the New Year at the Temple had other things on their minds. They came to bring sacrifices of thanksgiving for the bounty of God's favour and to pray for glories exceeding those of David and Solomon.

The festive mood, however, was soon disturbed by the harsh tones of a prophet orating from the steps of the Temple. An uncouth figure dressed in the rough garb of a shepherd, his appearance jarred the sensibilities of the gayly clad worshippers as much as what he had to say. Who is he? the people asked. Someone recognised him as Amos, a shepherd from down South in Judah. What is he doing here in Beth El? They stirred uneasily as he denounced the sins of Israel:

'Because they sell the righteous for silver
And the needy for a pair of shoes.....
And pervert the justice due to the humble.'
Then very ungallantly he turned on the women:
'Hear this word, you cows of Bashan,
Residing in the hills of Samaria,
that oppress the poor,
that crush the needy,
that say to their husbands,
Bring that we may feast'.

At this point Amaziah the High Priest of Beth El intervened.
'This is blasphemy', he cried.

'You are disturbing the sanctity of this holy day.
 This is a royal sanctuary,
 and you have no right to be here.
 Go back to Judah where you belong.'
 But the prophet refused to be deterred -
 'Thus saith the Lord
 I hate, I despise your feasts
 and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies;
 yea, though you offer Me burnt offerings and meal offerings
 I will not accept them
 Take away from me the noise of your hymns
 and let me not hear the melody of your psaltries,
 But let justice well up as waters,
 and righteousness as a mighty stream.'

Here we find the classic confrontation between two types of religion - the priestly and the prophetic. The priest thinks of religion in terms of a sanctuary where people come to seek the nearness of God through prayer and the pageantry of ritual - to find comfort and consolation and uplift - away from the quarrels of the marketplace and the cares of the world. The prophet sees religion rather as a goad to conscience. God, he says, is more interested in justice than in sacrifice or ritual. We can come nearest to God by championing the cause of the oppressed and establishing right relations between man and his neighbour. The priest looks back to the traditions and the precedents of the past. The prophet looks forward to the hopes and the possibilities of a better future. Which is the more authentic expression of Judaism? The Bible includes them both - the priestly traditions together with the prophetic challenges.

The Talmud tried to harmonise these conflicting approaches to religion. Both are needed. The rabbis recognised that human nature being what it is, Judaism could not survive on the pure oxygen of prophetic inspiration. It requires also the binding power of a living tradition. Then, too, they understood that nothing much can be achieved merely by the denunciation of wrong doing. If the prophetic teachings are to have any practical effect they must be embodied in laws and institutions which will guide men in the ways of justice and mercy and truth. In this way the Talmud tried to interpenetrate the priestly element with the moral purpose of the prophetic message.

But laws and institutions, however wise and well intentioned tend to become fossilised and obsolete. They tend to lag behind the

needs of changing times and conditions. This leads to a conflict between the champions of the old and the new - between those who cling to the order and security of a settled tradition and those who are prepared to face the risks and the challenge of new solutions.

The Talmud mentions just such a conflict between the Schools of Hillel and Shammai. It was a controversy which lasted 110 years, and the points of difference were so numerous that it was feared that the one Torah would soon become 2 separate Torahs. The main-spring of these differences is somewhat obscure. But it appears that the School of Shammai represented a more conservative viewpoint, adhering more rigorously to the letter of the law and the older traditions, while the School of Hillel tended towards greater leniency in their efforts to alleviate the burdens of obsolete laws.

The legend has it that when the 2 schools were finally reconciled, a Bat Kol or Heavenly Voice was heard saying: Elu v'elu divre Elohim chaim. Both are the words of the living God, but the law is according to the School of Hillel. Why so? Because the Hillelites, we are told, were more modest and more open minded. Despite sharp differences of interpretation and practise, the Talmud tells us that they did not develop into separate sects or try to exclude one another as heretical. Each was prepared to grant the other the right to be regarded as an authentic expression of Judaism. But it is interesting to note that it was the School of Hillel which prevailed because it was open to the future.

The fact is that Judaism is the product of a long process of change and development, the outgrowth of a long series of Reform movements. Abraham was a reformer who in the teeth of an idolatrous world brought forth the message of the One God. Moses was a reformer. In an age when kings and tyrants were hedged with divinity, he proclaimed the vision of a God who championed the cause of the oppressed, who redeemed a people from slavery. The prophets were reformers who shifted the emphasis of Jewish tradition from the ritual of animal sacrifice to a religion of high ethical purpose.

The Rabbis of the Talmud were reformers who enabled Judaism to meet the needs of changing times and conditions. There is nothing more historically authentic in Judaism than the impulse towards Reform.

The Orthodox Jew has been defined as one who worships dead Reformers. He clings to the great Reforms of the past, while the rest of us are more concerned with the Reforms that are needed to meet the challenge of a rapidly changing world, to do for our times what Abraham, Moses, the prophets and the rabbis of old did for their times.

Historically it can be shown that Judaism has always been a pluralism in accordance with the statement of the Jerusalem Talmud that there are 49 different ways of interpreting the Torah, that is, there are different ways of expressing Jewish faith.

Indeed the Talmud ridicules the notion of a monolithic unchanging Judaism since the time of Moses. It tells a rather humorous story about Moses up in heaven hearing reports of that great scholar, Rabbi Akiba, and his brilliant interpretations of the Torah. Curious to see what was going on, he received permission to go down to earth and sit in on one of Rabbi Akiba's lectures. Being very modest Moses sat down in the last row. But the more he listened the more confused he became. So he asked the student next to him, who is that man? Why that is Rabbi Akiba. What is he teaching? He is teaching the Torah. Whose Torah? Why the Torah of Moses, of course. Whereupon Moses cried out I am Moses, he is teaching my Torah and I can't understand a word of what he is saying. That is how the Talmud indicates that Judaism had already gone through a long process of change and development since the time of Moses, thus testifying to its pluralistic character.

The fact is that Judaism has been able to survive just because it had the capacity to adjust to changing times and conditions. Because the Reform process is as old as Judaism itself. There were wide differences between Sadducees, Pharisees and Essenes. Yet all were regarded as proper Jews.

Moses Maimonides, the leading Jewish thinker of the Middle Ages tried to reform Jewish teaching by putting it on a more rational philosophical basis and eliminating all elements of myth, magic and superstition. At first the Orthodox caused his books to be banned and to be burned, but now they want to claim him for their own. Dead reformers become Kosher.

Coming down closer to our own time there was the bitter conflict between Chasidim and Misnagdim. None other than Elijah the Gaon of Vilna, the pride of Lithuanian Jewry placed the Chasidim under the ban of excommunication. Relations were so strained that they would not eat of one another's shechitah, nor would they permit marriages between the 2 groups, and they denounced one another to the Russian government. More recently they have become somewhat reconciled, but certain strains and tensions still remain.

Now, what is more authentically Jewish than the Synagogue. Yet for all that there is no clear reference to the Synagogue in the Bible. Why not? The Biblical system of worship centered around the Temple, with its cult of animal sacrifices. But with the destruction of the Temple by the Romans, the rabbis substituted the Synagogue

with its more spiritual type of worship, of prayer and study. This is a more radical change than anything ever contemplated by modern reformers. The whole character of Judaism has been transformed.

What would you say is the most popular practise in Jewish life? Is it not the blessing of the Sabbath candles? What does the Bible say about it? 'You shall not kindle fires in all your habitations on the Sabbath'. So the rabbis asked, does this mean we must sit in darkness and freeze on cold Sabbath nights? Being rabbis they found another posuk in Isa.(58:13) 'call the Sabbath a delight'. They took this to mean that the Sabbath was meant to be a day of joy and gladness, not a day of misery and affliction. So they suggested the kindling of lights before the onset of the Sabbath in order to enjoy light and warmth on Sabbath evenings.

The Orthodox or Conservatives of those days - Samaritans, Sadducees, Essenes and later the Karaites were opposed to the idea of Sabbath lights. To counter these objections the rabbis went even further. Not only did they permit the kindling of Sabbath lights, they even declared it a mitzvah, a religious duty. The blessing of the Sabbath lights is a still later innovation that was not finalised until the 12th century. Some scholars think it was instituted as a result of the controversy with the Karaites, who in their insistence on the literal understanding of the Bible were opposed to Sabbath lights.

To score a point off the Karaites and to confound their teachings the rabbis brought in the blessing of the Sabbath candles 'who had sanctified us with His commandments and commanded us to kindle the Sabbath lights.'

What a colossal chutzpa! Where in the Bible does it say to kindle the Sabbath lights? Quite the contrary. To the Orthodox of those days it appeared outrageous, with no traditional basis at all. But outrageous or not this radical Reform has become the most beloved home practise in Judaism. It has done more than anything else to preserve the Sabbath and to sanctify the Jewish home. What could be more authentic? So that when the Jewish woman blesses the Sabbath candles, she bears witness to the power and the validity of the Reform process in Jewish life.

Nothing is more strongly condemned both in Bible and Talmud than the taking of interest. Yet in the later Middle Ages, money lending was virtually the only source of livelihood open to Jews in Europe. Indeed the right to live in certain areas was granted only on condition that they engage in money lending. So how did the rabbis deal with the problem? They devised a 'Heter Shtar Iska' as sort of fictitious partnership agreement in which the interest was treated as a

share of the profit - this made it kosher.

The establishment of the State of Israel was bitterly opposed by the ultra orthodox who still have great difficulty in accepting it. In Mea Shearim, Yom Ha'Atzmaut, Israel Independence Day is treated as a day of mourning. They act as if they would rather be under Arafat or Hussein. Why? They can't handle the idea of an independent Jewish State. Why not? The ostensible reason is that the establishment of the Jewish State must wait for the coming of the Messiah. But there is also a deeper reason which was suggested by the Late Zadok Cohen, the former chief Rabbi of France. He was a friend of Herzl but was opposed to Zionism Why? Because, he maintained, the Jewish State must be based on the Halacha; and a State based on Halacha could never survive. Why not? Because of the problem of the Shabbes goy. Orthodox Jewry could not exist without the services of the Shabbes goy - not just the one who comes in to milk the cows and fix the fire on Shabbat, but the 1000's of invisible Shabbes goyim who take care of all the essential services on the Sabbath - army, police, firemen, electric power, water works, telephone etc.

In the Diaspora, Jews do not have to worry about such things. They are done by goyim. But how could a Jewish State based on Halacha function without these essential services? Must it depend on the Arabs to provide these services? or must it look to the secular Jews to provide the services of the Shabbes goy? Is it halachically acceptable to make another Jew your Shabbes goy? The late Louis Rabinowitz, formerly chief Rabbi of Johannesburg, said that it was necessary to re-interpret the Halacha so that even observant Jews could be expected to perform these vital services on the Sabbath. He based it on the principle of the saving of life - the survival of the State. But his colleagues refuse to listen; they are afraid to address themselves to the problem. They are waiting for the Messiah to solve this problem.

On what principles then did the great rabbis of former times base their reforms? They found in the Talmud a number of pointers which opened the door to the possibilities of change. There was Hillel, who when in doubt about a fine point of practise said, 'Go out and see what the people are doing. That is the law'. His approach to the law was democratic in spirit. These rabbis were also mindful that the law must serve life and not stifle it. 'One must not impose a restriction on the public that the public cannot endure,' they said. That is, any law which imposed undue hardship on the community or which the large majority of the people cannot accept is a dead letter.

Moreover there were always wide differences of local custom. Joel Mueller wrote a book listing the differences of practise between the Jews of Babylon and those of ancient Israel. For example, among Palestinian Jews a ring was used for the marriage ceremony. In Babylon a ring was not allowed and a coin was used instead. The Babylonians permitted the carrying of money on the Sabbath. In Palestine it was forbidden even to touch money on the Sabbath. Babylonians had 7 wedding blessings, the Palestinians only 3. The Babylonians read through the Torah in the Synagogue in one year, the Palestinians took 3 years to read through the Torah. In Babylon 10 men were required for a minyan, in Palestine they were content with 6 or 7.

But even among the Palestinians there were wide differences of practise. Thus there was a Rabbi Jose in Gallilee who permitted the eating of the flesh of fowls together with milk. He liked his chicken fried southern style in butter. When taken to task by his colleagues he replied that there is nothing to forbid this in the Bible. It says only, Thou shall not cook a kid in its mother's milk. How could this apply to a chicken?

The fact is that the halacha has never been as monolithic as some would like us to believe. Judaism has been able to contain such wide variations in practise, that to declare only one particular system the only correct and authentic one or any attempt to impose a rigid uniformity of practise would be self defeating - it could lead only to the fragmentation of Jewish life.

Prof Louis Ginzburg a leading Talmudist of the last generation put it this way: 'The vitality of an organism is shown in its power of adaptation.' Indeed the survival of Judaism has been made possible by this power of adaptation in order to meet the challenge of changing conditions.'

As an example of this process, let us take a look at the law of chalitzah. The Bible says that if a man dies childless, his brother must marry the widow and the first child of that union is accounted as the son and heir of the deceased brother and inherits his property. This provides security for the childless widow. But if the brother refuses to marry the widow he must go through a humiliating ceremony of chalitzah - during which the widow pulls off his sandal, after which she is free to marry another man. This is done to put pressure on the brother to take care of the widow. This law is an authentic human response to the problem of the childless widow for that period. This law is practical only in an age of polygamy. The Talmud tried to discourage polygamy - so it said, he should not marry the childless widow, but release her through the chalitzah ceremony. This was an

authentic response for the Talmudic period. Today, as the widow may not remarry without chalitzah she is at the mercy of the brother-in-law, who can demand money or refuse to agree to a chalitzah out of malice. Hence, as a law intended to protect the childless widow can today serve only to victimise her, wouldn't it be the authentic human thing to abolish it as no longer serving the need for which it was intended.

Other justifications for flexibility or changes in the older laws as enumerated in the Talmud are - Mipne darkey Shalom - for the sake of peace; we bend the law to promote peace and good will. Pikuach nefesh - the saving of life justifies even the breaking of the Sabbath. Mipne tikum olam - for the improvement of the social order.

It was in this spirit that Rabbeinu Gershom, 1000 years ago prohibited polygamy even though it was sanctioned by the Bible. On the same grounds he also denied a man the right given him by the Bible to divorce his wife against her will. Any reforms therefore, in this spirit, to make Judaism more relevant, more meaningful, more liveable are just as valid and just as authentic as those promulgated by the great rabbis of former times. The laws were given, we read in the Torah, Va chai Bahem 'so that you may live by them' - to which the rabbis added 'and not so that you may die by them.'

If Judaism is to survive in the modern world, it should respect the experience of the past but it must also be able to respond to present day needs. There must be a way to enable those Jews who cannot or will not live by the laws and restrictions of the medieval ghetto to lead a worthwhile type of Jewish life in a free society. This is the great challenge of our times, how to be a Jew in an age of freedom. In this respect Reform is performing an important pioneering role. It is showing the way that others are following and indeed must follow if Judaism is to survive in a world of ever accelerating change. Just as a tree has a growing edge which gives it life, so too do we find in Reform the growing edge of Judaism.

Moreover, modern students of Jewish history have pointed out that there is not and probably never was any one single authentic Judaism. God is one, but the fabric of Judaism has been woven of many varied strands. The Judaism of Akiba was different from the Judaism of Moses. The Judaism of the priest Amaziah was different from that of the prophet Amos. The Judaism of the philosopher Maimonides was different from that of the Kabbalists as the Judaism of the Vilna Gaon was different from that of the Chasidim. Priest and prophet, poet and scholar, rationalist and mystic, pietist and reformer, each

had his own distinctive contribution to make to the richly variegated texture of Jewish life.

Our historians have taught us to see Judaism not as something monolithic, fixed, static and unchanging - the same today as 4 000 years ago. But rather as a living organism going through different stages of growth and development - constantly changing and adjusting to meet the challenge of each new day. To be authentic our Judaism must be rooted in our historic traditions. But if it is to avoid fossilisation it must be fully responsive to present day needs. That is Judaism has always been most authentic when it was Progressive.

