

Preface to the Fourth Edition

This book, first published in 1957, had its genesis in a study and discussion group at the New West End Synagogue, where I served as Minister. The group was particularly interested in exploring questions of Jewish belief against the background of modern thought. A friend, Dr Ian Gordon, suggested the title to imply that the book was an attempt to defend by a reasoned argument aspects of the Jewish faith under attack. The book was, in fact, intended as a small contribution to Jewish apologetics in no way to be iconoclastic. The New West End was (and still is) a constituent of the Orthodox United Synagogue headed by Chief Rabbi Israel (later Sir Israel) Brodie, and I 'reasonably believed' at the time that the book was fully compatible with the somewhat tepid Orthodoxy then prevailing in Anglo-Jewry. When I presented the book to the Chief Rabbi, he accepted it without the slightest objection to any of its contents; though I still do not know whether he bothered then to read it.

In 1960 I was appointed Moral Tutor at Jews' College and was given an assurance by the Governing Body of the College that on the retirement of Dr Isidore Epstein I would succeed him as Principal of the institution. One or two individuals belonging to the extreme right approached the Chief Rabbi to point out that, in their view, the book contained heretical notions regarding the traditional doctrine of Torah Min Ha-Shamayim (The Torah is from Heaven'), with the result that he blocked my appointment as Principal of Jews' College and, later, my return to the New West End as Minister to the congregation. Thus began the 'Jacobs Affair' and the hitherto quite innocuous book acquired the notoriety that increased its sales as nothing else could have done. A second edition was published in 1962 and a third revised edition in 1965, the latter containing an Epilogue in which I took on my critics.

Following the 'Jacobs Affair', the New London Synagogue was established by my supporters in 1964; the New North London Synagogue in 1974 (with Rabbi Jonathan Wittenberg as its Rabbi); and the Edgware Masorti Synagogue in 1984

(with Rabbi Chaim Wiener as its Rabbi). Although each Rabbi is free to develop his own approach, the three congregations are now under the broad umbrella of Masorti (the name means 'traditional'), to which a further four congregations are affiliated. The Masorti movement is growing fast. Essentially, Masorti adopts the attitude towards Torah Min Ha-Shamayyim sketched in *We Have Reason to Believe*. This is the major theological difference between Anglo-Jewish Orthodoxy and Masorti. Despite Orthodox unfounded assertions to the contrary, Masorti does believe in Torah Min Ha-Shamayyim but has a very different understanding from Orthodoxy on what is meant by 'from'. To judge from the utterances of Orthodox Rabbis who have addressed the subject (many have preferred to be discreetly silent), they understand the doctrine to mean, as it did in the Middle Ages, that every word and every letter of the Torah (the Pentateuch, the Five Books of Moses) was conveyed directly by God to Moses during the 40 years' journey of the Israelites through the wilderness. Moreover, the interpretation of the Written Torah known as the Oral Torah was conveyed by God to Moses during the 40 days and nights that he stayed on Mount Sinai. This Oral Torah, handed down intact from generation to generation, is found in the Talmudic literature. It is true, of course, that the Talmudic and later sages introduced new legislation, and there are numerous debates regarding the details of the Oral Torah, but the whole process is seen as enjoying direct divine sanction.

The Talmud tells, for instance, that when the rival Schools of Hillel and Shammai engaged in debate on numerous points of law, a Heavenly voice eventually proceeded to declare: 'Both these and these are the words of the living God'. Far from infrequently in the Middle Ages and frequently among the Orthodox today, this poetic fancy was taken quite literally to mean that when Moses was on Sinai, God told him both sets of opinions, leaving it for the School of Hillel in the future to choose one, the School of Shammai the other. Here and there among the mediaeval authors it is accepted that some verses were added, after the death of Moses, to the Written Torah. But the view accepted by Orthodoxy today seems to be that even the words 'And the Lord spoke to Moses' were themselves 'spoken' by God to Moses.

Conceived of in this sense, the Torah is, in its entirety, the very word of God, glorious and infallible in all its parts. In *We Have Reason to Believe* and in other books I have tried to show why the majority of well-informed Jews today do not and cannot accept this fundamentalist picture for all its grandeur. What is involved is the historical understanding of the Jewish religion. 'Fundamentalism' has a bad name nowadays. To be fair, it is better to describe the Orthodox view as 'unhistorical'.

Since the *Jiidische Wissenschaft* movement in the last century the critico-historical method has been applied to the classical sources of Judaism. This historical approach has long been adopted in colleges for the training of Rabbis as well as in universities all over the world, and the method has been adopted successfully even to the study of the Pentateuch, to say nothing of the rest of the Bible. It is revealing that there has been hardly any protest at the new JPS Torah Commentary (edited by Nahum M. Sarna, Philadelphia, 1989 onwards; to date only the Commentary to Deuteronomy is lacking), although this Commentary pursues a critical methodology throughout according to which the Pentateuch is seen as a composite work produced at various stages in the history of ancient Israel and influenced by the civilizations in which Jews lived. For all that, the work is a Jewish Commentary with a Jewish flavour and with recourse to the traditional Jewish teachers as well to modern scholars. As Dr Hertz is reported to have said, a degree of *epikorsus* is almost bound to remain in the mind of a Jewish student at the university but it should be Jewish *epikorsus* (heresy). This is not to say that Orthodoxy is satisfied with the JPS Commentary. It is rather that the right-wing ignores the Commentary as it tends to ignore Dr Hertz's Commentary, for all that Hertz is opposed to the Documentary Hypothesis, because Hertz quotes non-Jewish authors.

When studying the Mishnah which states {Sanhedrin 10: 1), 'One who says the Torah is not from heaven has no share in the World to Come', a Jewish scholar, employing the historical method, will try to set the Mishnaic statement in its background. Why did the Mishnah make such a statement at that particular time {probably in the second century) and

what was being affirmed? The context shows that, in fact, this statement, and others in the same Mishnah, are directed against various sectarians. This one is directed, as the Talmud says, against those who believed that Moses did write the Torah but maintained that he made it all up out of his own head. Thus the statement 'The Torah is from Heaven' is a Mishnaic way of saying, as we would put it today, that Judaism is a revealed religion. The same applies to Maimonides' thirteen principles of the faith appended to his Commentary on this Mishnah. The great mediaeval thinker did not simply sit down to record cold-bloodedly what Judaism expects a Jew to believe. Rather, he was reacting to rival claims that the Torah of Moses had been superseded by Christianity and Islam and to the claims of the Karaites that the Oral Torah is an invention of the Rabbis.

It is true, of course, that for all their vast wisdom and knowledge, the Talmudic Rabbis and the mediaeval thinkers did not operate with the tools of modern historical research. How could they? They had no access to the historical methodology, which remained undeveloped until the post-mediaeval period. The first authentic Jewish historian was the sixteenth-century Azariah de Rossi, whose book *Meor Eynayitn* was condemned for its implication that the historical references in the Talmud and the Midrash have to be assessed against the records of the Greek and Latin authors. The task of the Jewish theologian is not to try to defend the mediaeval picture of how Judaism came about. Such a picture has gone, never to return. The modern Jewish theologian, true to the tradition, has to try to understand how, now that Judaism is seen to have had a history (which means that there is a human element in revelation), the traditional view of *Torah Min Ha-Shamayyim* can be re-interpreted while still retaining its ancient vigour and power. The solution, as Zechariah Frankel saw in the last century, is to see the whole process in dynamic rather than static terms; that, in the words of Robert Gordis, God gave the Torah not only to the Jewish people but through the Jewish people. Historically considered, this is behind the whole doctrine of the Oral Torah which constantly interprets the Written Torah. Isaiah Leibovitz was surely right when he noted that it is the Oral Torah that has become the authority for the Written Torah by deciding which of the ancient writings

belong to the Torah and which do not.

The attempt by some traditionalists to preserve the old picture by rejecting all science and all modern thought is futile. There can be no going back. A particularly absurd attempt in some Orthodox circles to show that the Torah is God-given in the older sense is to use the ultra-modern methods of research by computer to show that the Torah contains a hidden Code that could only have been planted by the Almighty. In a recent book this results in such weird and wonderful ideas as that the Torah, when uncoded, refers to AIDS and to Hitler. This kind of nonsense only succeeds in turning the Torah into a book of magic and reduces Judaism to something like an Old Moore's Almanac or the golden tablets of the Mormons conveyed by the Angel Gabriel. Revelation is too tremendous a theme to be treated in such a simplistic, ridiculous manner, which is, in any event, untraditional, since before the invention of computers the documents had remained uncoded.

The position sketched in this book, allowing history a voice in the understanding of Judaism, originated in the Breslau School founded by Zechariah Frankel. Such a position in no way involves any rejection of belief in the Torah and in the mitzvot as divine commands. The Torah is still God-given if the 'giving' is seen to take place through the historical experiences of the Jewish people in its long quest for God. If Orthodoxy means a belief in the God who plants false clues, the God who gave us our reason but condemns us for following where it leads, then those of us who have been trained to think historically not only reject Orthodoxy but believe that our conscience demands that we reject it. We are however, far removed from the secularist point of view which rejects the doctrine of Torah Min Ha-Shamayim because there is no Shamayim.

On the personal level I have been on friendly terms with Chief Rabbi Brodie and with his successors in that Office, Lord Jakobovits and Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, though, naturally, we differ on important theological matters. I sometimes wonder what exactly these Chief Rabbis have means by Torah Min Ha-Shamayim since none of them has ever tried to spell it out. It is not for a Chief Rabbi in any event to define Jewish

dogmas in Papal fashion. The Office of Chief Rabbi has no support in the Jewish tradition, and even the Pope is held to be infallible by his followers only when he speaks *ex cathedra*.

In view of this it is disconcerting to find Rabbi Sacks implying that I adopt the secularist position, a position against which I have fought all my career as a Rabbi. Rabbi Sacks in *One People of Tradition, Modernity and Jewish Unity*. (The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, London, 1993, p. 15 and note), rejects the view that Jewish law, the Halakhah, is 'historically endorsed habit', a view he ascribes to me in note 31, quoting from my book *A Jewish Theology* (London, 1973, p. 224): 'Yes, it is true, in a sense, that the whole of the Torah is minhag, custom, growing through the experience of human beings and interpreted by them in response to particular conditions in human history.' It is beyond belief that Rabbi Sacks has left his readers in ignorance that I continue, in the very next sentence: 'But we go on from there to say that since this happened, since this is how God revealed Himself, then the minhag of Israel is Torah.' And in the next paragraph I go on to say that Judaism is more than ethics, more than history, more than sociology, and I add: 'Judaism is a religion and a religious approach must see the mitzvot as ways to God. The sanction for the mitzvot is that they succeed in bringing men to God. Because they do this they are commanded by God.'

Naturally, the dynamic approach cannot and does not result in total acceptance of all the details of the Halakhah as recorded in the 'Orthodox' tradition. But in my book *A Tree of Life: Diversity, Flexibility, and Creativity in Jewish Law* (The Littman Library for Oxford University Press, 1964), I have tried to show that there has never been a 'pure' Halakhah apart from the other powerful elements in Judaism, and that the great Halakhists allowed into their systems these elements - philosophical, mystical, ethical and even sociological - so that behind every Halakhist there sat an Aggadist, asking, consciously or unconsciously, not only what the Halakhah is but what it should be if the total values of Judaism are to be preserved.

I do not deny that there is bound to be some ambiguity

with regard to some of the Halakhic details. Modern religious Jews are obliged to engage in a quest, seeking the Torah that speaks to our age as our ancestors sought the Torah that spoke to theirs. The very word Midrash (from a root meaning 'to seek') implies that this kind of questing for the Torah is itself Torah. It is not just that to seek is to find. Rather, in seeking the many-splendoured thing that is Judaism one has already found it because one is engaged in the process. I have sometimes yielded to the temptation, when challenged that my views are ambiguous, to declare that it is better to be vaguely right than definitely wrong. The first edition of *We have Reason to Believe* appeared almost 40 years ago. My ideas have changed over these years and I have tried to reflect the changes in my later books. I do not now, at the age of 74, have the dogmatism that was mine at the comparatively youthful age of 37. 'None of us is infallible,' said Jowett, 'not even the youngest of us.' Nevertheless, I still hold fast to the historical approach and still reject fundamentalism as I did so long ago. I have consequently welcomed Frank Cass's suggestion that it might be useful to republish the earlier work in paperback format. When *Ahad Ha-Am* published his essays on Zionism, Yeshivah students, reading them surreptitiously, were wont to ask: *vos mil er?* (what does he want?; 'what is he getting at?'). If some friends see from the book what I was getting at, this will be mine and Frank's justification.

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