LET US SUPPOSE a Jew to have recognized the uniqueness of Jewish character and history; let us assume that he has sought, in order to ease heart and mind and to bring order into his thought and action, to re-identify himself with his people. Let us suppose him to have gained the insight that this self-redemptive effort is the pre-supposition of his ow and his children’s survival. He knows at once that this inner change and spiritual act must sooner or later lead to other acts; it must lead to renewals and new forms; it must lead to a transformation of his whole life. There are Christians who come to similar conclusions out of similar experiences. More and more Jews are confronting this inner act of recognition and re-alliance within themselves. But when they seek to draw me right inferences in action, when they set out to change their lives, they are met, from, many quarters, including deceptively respectable ones, with the cry: “But you cannot do that in this world and age; do you think the clock can be set back? We are in the middle of the 20th century. History races on.”

Ah yes, history races on; every age has been progressive. The Latin word from which progressive comes, the verb progresdior, means to march forward. Forward – to what goal? A murderer marches forward to the scene of his crime. Forward movement in space or time has no virtue of its own. The quality of the goal of movement determines the quality of the act. People are foolishly proud of being, as the silly saying goes, forward-looking. To do what do they look forward? Usually to a multiplication of the sins and evils with which man is already afflicted. How well the great Pascal understood that three centuries ago. “Heedless we rush toward a precipice, after we have placed between it and our thought and action, to re-identify himself with his people. Let us suppose him to have gained the insight that this self-redemptive effort is the pre-supposition of his ow and his children’s survival. He knows at once that this inner change and spiritual act must sooner or later lead to other acts; it must lead to renewals and new forms; it must lead to a transformation of his whole life. There are Christians who come to similar conclusions out of similar experiences. More and more Jews are confronting this inner act of recognition and re-alliance within themselves. But when they seek to draw me right inferences in action, when they set out to change their lives, they are met, from, many quarters, including deceptively respectable ones, with the cry: “But you cannot do that in this world and age; do you think the clock can be set back? We are in the middle of the 20th century. History races on.”

What is the “knowledge” of these times? What are these “changes in conditions” and this “modern outlook” which are to guide us? What kind of a world is this, morally and intellectually, which is to be our criterion of belief and action?

Let us see what this world is like according to the testimony of a few of the loftiest spirits in the realm of the world’s peoples, of the non-Jewish world. When, after an absence of sixteen years Thomas Mann reluctantly visited Germany, he said in his discourse at Frankfurt: “To my dead son, a victim of this time of crisis, our great French friend, Andre Gide, said: ‘When young people come to me for advice I am so ashamed of my incompetence and helplessness and so embarrassed. They ask me whether there is any way out of this present crisis, whether there is any logic, any purpose, any meaning behind this utter confusion. But who am I to give them an answer? I myself do not know.’ If Gide could speak so, had to speak so - who am I to pretend to better knowledge? How man is to re-attain the blessing of moral authority, to some faith that is better than superstition born of need, a wretched hiding-place of mere refuge in face of the Sphinx’s demanding glance - our helplessness before this question is great indeed.” (3)

BUT IT NEEDED not the second World War; it needed not the ultimate horrors to reveal to elevated and sensitive spirits the character of our civilization in this age. In 1938 Paul Valery spoke thus to a group of French Collegians: “Never has humanity united in itself so much power and so much confusion, so much anxiety and so many mere toys, so much knowledge and so many uncertainties. Anxiety and futility share our days between them. … Modern life tends to spare us all intellectual effort even as it spares us physical effort.” (4) That is doubtless the central practical insight, that most contemporary men spare themselves intellectual effort. They cease to think.

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They repeat the rubber-stamped verbiage of so-called “progressivism” like the excellent Jews quoted here. They yield to the age and its evils instead of arising to resist them.

From neither Mann nor Valery, artists of the first order though they are, may we expect a quite last word of analysis, though in discourse here quoted Mann trembles on the brink of it. We hear that last word uttered by the one great, lonely Russian soul of our time, by the philosopher Nicolas Berdyaev: “The crisis of culture cannot be surmounted by its own exclusive means, shaken as it is to the very foundations. We must of necessity turn to far deeper sources.” (5) To those deeper sources Berdyaev descended and found the last word of wisdom for this world and this age. “Man is so made that he lives by faith in God or else by faith in idols. When he loses his faith in God he falls into idolatry. The cult of idols is found today in all areas: in science, in art, in the political, national, social forms of life. Thus communism, for instance, is an extreme form of social idolatry.” (6)

Do Jews need to be told that? Is it not written down on every page of the Torah? Were not a blessing and a curse set before Israel in the birth-hour of its history - a blessing “if ye obey the commandments of the Lord, your God … a curse, if ye will not obey” and “go after other gods?” (7) Is not that alternative of Berdyaev the core and kernel of prophetic Judaism? “The ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God.” (8) And there is, as here and there a few are coming to see, no other salvation, no other hope-among men for justice or for freedom. Nor was this insight and this conviction ever lost in Israel until the other day, until Jews forgot their truth which a stricken world is seeking to recover, until, to express it in brief Symbols, they exchanged Torah and Talmud (9) for Darwin and Marx and intellectually cooperated in the downfall of that civilization which had once housed both Jew and Christian and had at least measurably, kept at bay the nethermost forces of primordial barbarism and horror.

The house is in ruins. Dismay and terror are in the hearts of men. Let us add Buber’s analysis to those of Mann and Valery: “The present situation is marked by the confluence of cosmic and social homelessness, of terror in the face of the universe and .of life which has given rise to a mood of loneliness which has probably never before existed in this measure. (10) In all contemporary thought, even in the domain of literary criticism, we find these words unconsciously reechoed. Anxiety and alienation are the plaints that are offered. The poet cannot create in a world and a universe so shattered, so empty of values, so blood-soaked, so deserted by God and good. The novel is in a state of decay because there are no threads by which the human world is held together. Music crashes into cacophonies and painting jabs the eye because harmony would be falsehood and because the symmetry of the visible world has vanished to the eye that has lost faith and so abandoned form. It is clear to the most superficial observer that our civilization is in naked fact “shaken to its very foundations,” as Berdyaev wrote, and that, even in the apparently half-stable West, in France, in England, in the United States, we are on the very brink of chaos of the heart and mind and of the classical purposes and aspirations of man.

And this is the world to which the Jew is asked to conform; this is the world which he is asked to make his guide and criterion. This is that “modern” world, these are those “changed conditions” which are supposed to keep him from re-integrating himself with, his people, with the sources of his being, with God against idolatry, with freedom against the slavery to idols and to terror and to death. There is an unfathomable malice in that satanic spirit of the time which seduces good but blinded men to tell Jews that they must not do this nor believe that because it is not in conformity with the temper of this age of doom and of confusion. They are counselled not to arise and resist and seek to save what may yet be saved hut to plunge into the horrors which have already destroyed six millions of their people.

THIS IS THE HARDEST thing to speak of. Yet it must be done. In the diary which Andre Gide kept during the German occupation of France he deplores that lack of sympathetic imagination in people which causes them to accept coolly the sufferings of others which they themselves are not forced actually to undergo. (11) In that sharp form the reproach cannot be brought against American Jewry. From 1933 on and especially since 1938 thousands of hearts among us trembled and thousands of willing hands of help were stretched out. The political efforts put forth first against the Mandatory Power and next for the establishment of the State of Israel, the splendor of material generosity, unrivalled in all history - these unforgettable acts bore witness or seemed to bear witness to a deep vitality in the American Jewish community. But very troubling circumstances followed: the slackening of effort since the establishment of the State, of which more will be said hereafter, but also and above all, the failure of American Jewry to incorporate its experience in its thinking.
How did that come about? How could that come about? The psychical mechanisms involved are simple and very, very human. Great positive gifts were doubtless given and great positive acts of political agitation performed. But the average Jew who gave to United Appeal and the average Jew who allied himself with some Zionist group did so in a spirit of avoidance and I self-defense and hidden shame. “Not of us be it said” and “abish omen” (“unbeschriggen”); the thing must be stopped and alleviated lest it spread and reach us … and wry jests were made to ward off fear and there was a great, whistling in the dark. And now it is over, over, and we can go or worshipping idols in a reasonably comfortable world. It is for this reason and this reason alone that Jews can still be told to conform to the world, the immediate and unchanged world in which this monstrous thing happened, in which its aftermath and qualitatively identical consequences are still happening.

How can this thing he so positively asserted? Because the books that delineated what had happened in Europe did not sell - neither the earlier accounts nor the later, neither the Warsaw diaries nor even the mild and careful anthology of Mr. Leo W. Schwarz of just the other day (12). To what is this thing to be likened, as the Talmudic sages were fond of saying? It is to be likened to this: A man is told that his brother has been afflicted with a frightful and disfiguring disease - his own brother, son of the same father and of the same mother. He offers to send gifts. He is told that gifts are not enough. His brother is coming to see him, to show him his affliction. The man telegraphs his brother: he must not come. Other and richer gifts are on the way. He himself is busy and not too well. The afflicted brother is grateful for the gifts. They alleviate his need and his suffering. But he needs to see his beloved kinsman face to face. The unaffected brother sends still more gifts, and sets out on a long journey the term or end of which he confesses not even to himself.

AMERICAN JEWS refused to see their brothers’ faces. In 1944 a Christian Pole, an emissary of the Polish Government in exile in London, Jan Karski, published a book called “The Story of a Secret State.” Chapter 30 of that book is called “To die in agony” …. You read it and your cheek blanches and your voice dies. It is beyond tears, far, far beyond. These things happened precisely as they are coldly told on this page; they happened to Jews, to our brothers, to the simple and the learned, to the helpless, the kind, the intelligent, the brave; they happened yesterday. The Germans and their helpers, Poles and Ukrainians and Estonians, who executed this precise thing may still be alive in the world, may still breathe the air and see the light of the sun. They have not died of the horror of their deeds; they were not blinded for evermore, as neither was M. Jan Karski, by what they had seen. They came out of the world of which these acts were the ineffably poisoned and satanic blooms; they continued to live in this world. M. Karski went to Mass, as he tells us. Let us hope that he felt shriven. And Szmul Zygelboym, a leader of Polish Jewry who knew and had seen turned on the gas in his London apartment and died in the hope that his voluntary death might stir the world into succoring his perishing people. There was not even a ripple. There was silence. There was nothing. M. Karski doubtless continued to perform his devotions with a clean conscience.

Such is this world to which Jews are bidden to bow down and to conform. It has not changed that world. It is not enough to say: Ah yes, we know, we know, and then again bring vain oblations to the monstrous idol whose feet are deep in the congealed blood of the children of our people. That way lies final ruin. Rather must it be said: No Jew and no Christian has a right to live and guide his actions as though the six million had not died in agony. For this thing did not happen far away or long ago in a remote period long transformed by the dynamism of history. It happened yesterday; it has not ceased happening. It was this world, this Christendom out of which it sprang, as fruit from tree, as child from womb. And over this world in whose womb this thing grew no radical change has come. We are all still involved in that unspeakable world; our feet are on the very brink of those innumerable graves. No Christian has a right to live without a daily act of contrition and some effort toward expiation; no Jew has a right to live without a daily Yiskor, a daily memorial service in his heart and a steadily conscious ahavath Yisreal, a love of Israel, his people, that guides his every action and his every thought. Love of Israel, be it noted: not hatred of any enemy. Such is the last word and the last truth about this world and this age in which we live.

People know this thing in a dim way. But they do not want to know it to be so and they invent arguments of avoidance and escape. Other periods, they say, shaking their heads with feigned fatalism, were just as bad. It is a lie in avoidance. Other ages were not as bad. All Jews have heard of the pogrom of Kishinev in Czarist Russia, since the whole world rang with indignation and horror. Do you who read these lines know how many people were killed in Kishinev? Forty-five. And several hundred wounded. (13) And the whole world, it must be repeated, was up in arms. But the Inquisition! Is that not a trump card? No. The classic historians of that

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infamous and unsavory institution record that those “handed over to the secular arm” those actually executed are to be reckoned in the hundreds only over many decades and in several lands. (14) Not until after the First World War did there begin this age in which we live with its unbridled dance of death, its insane horrors, its peculiar corruption of the human soul. Yet even the bitter pogroms of the Russian counter revolutionary armies in the Ukraine were the acts of hoodlums, bandits, drunken mercenaries. They had not the slow, cold, systematic, pseudo-ideological fury of Nazi murder or Stalinist “liquidation.” No subtly devised concentration camps were built to break both body and spirit; no “progressive” machines for the cremation of the living were invented; no by-products of human soap or human leather were planned. In no other age either had methods been carefully thought out by which to break down the resistance of human personality without death, so that Princes of the Roman Church and decent American business men confess to crimes which either are no crimes or of which they were wholly ignorant. The incomparable horrors of this age arise from the fact that these horrors are not the result of barbaric lusts, untutored rage, drunkenness and primitive cruelty. They are the icy calculated, icily executed results of definite doctrines. And these doctrines arise, as Berdiaev has pointed out with everlasting validity, when man who “is so made that he lives by faith, loses his faith in God and “falls into idolatry.” (15)

THIS ARGUMENT has been made rather elaborate because no one who knows contemporary American Jewry can fail to have observed that there is a great fear of not being modern, of not being, so to speak, up-to-date, of lagging behind. The rabbinate has not always been guiltless of furthering this cult of “modernity.” Therefore it seemed necessary to show the meaning of “modernity” and to describe the content of the concept in terms of reality. The crimes which have made this age in which we live the foulest in human history were consciously motivated by doctrines; they were and are still defended by pseudo-philosophical arguments. Hegel and Nietzsche, Darwin and Marx, who themselves in their human character would have shrunk in utter dismay from the contemporary embodiment of their doctrines; these and the malicious criticism of the Bible and the cultivation of certain “social” pseudo-sciences, these have furnished ground-work and rationalization to the varied demonisms which have brought mankind so near its downfall. Every argument arising from this complex of ideas may be today denounced as false and vicious - as false and vicious a priori, that is, on the plain evidence of experience. Knowing so well the poisonous fruits, need we even examine the roots of the tree that bore them?

The doctrines of so-called modernity which still contaminate our intellectual and moral climate have been discredited by every philosophical and every practical argument. When they are offered, they must be presumed false. They provide the rectification and change and “progress” that lead to the abyss. Whatever stems from them is morally tainted. Whatever stems from them has the stench of the gas-chamber and the slave camp. It is not the Torah that has failed; it is not the predominantly Pharisaic ethics of Jesus that have failed. These have been denied and despised and trodden under foot. It is the idols that have failed; it is Moloch that has devoured the children of mankind in his foul flames. How can any thoughtful Jew be so deceived and so corrupted and so confused as to be prevented from returning to his people, his center, the everlasting sources of his being, his tradition of history and the knowledge of his God by doctrines and devices that have, to the plain perception of common sense and common observation, turned, earth into a wilderness and men into insane’ demons. Have we not a better knowledge and a better way? “The whole of Israel,” wrote Jehuda Halevy in his Kitab al Khazari, “knew these things, first from personal experience and afterwards through uninterrupted tradition, which is equal to the former.” The personal experience has been clouded by the follies of the pagan world and the tradition has been violently torn asunder. If we would be redeemed in order to survive we must turn inward, we must turn deep, within to recover the experience and gain the strength to re-ally ourselves with that great tradition which has redemptive power for both ourselves and for the world.

(1) Pascal. Pensees No. 182
(4) Paul Valéry. Variete IV. 1938
(7) Deut. XI. 26-8.
(8) Isaiah LII, 10.
(9) Cf. Makkoth 24a.