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meet the needs of a public weaned on autonomy as a value. But perseverance paid off. Now that "sacred survival" no longer offers a rallying cry and American political liberalism is proving problematic, American Jews want to return to their roots. But with alarming regularity, they are sensing that where they should find their roots they are finding only a Judaized version of the very liberalism they find so empty. Hence, the popularity of modern Orthodoxy among many of our most serious young.

### The Eternal Attraction of Mitzvot

Contrary to the collective fears of Reform, Reconstructionist and Conservative leaders, *mitzvah* will not chase Jews away from Judaism. Communities shaped by *mitzvah* are communities in which serious Jewish education is a lifelong pursuit, in which shared values and commitments foster profound friendships, where Shabbat is a world unto itself and in which Judaism provides warmth and meaning in ways that most Jews today imagine are no longer possible.

*Mitzvah* is our way of saying that Judaism matters. Serious environmentalists do not abandon principle when it becomes inconvenient. It is devotion to standards even in the face of inconvenience that differentiates a fad from a commitment. Principled vegetarians do not eat meat just because there is no vegetarian entree on the menu. They understand that principles can prove awkward, but that in the long run, they inject meaning into the serious of decisions that make up our lives.

Does *mitzvah* have to mean Orthodoxy? No. Jewish tradition is sufficiently complex to allow for a multiplicity of expressions of the notion of commandedness. Not all of us will agree on how to combine a commitment to *mitzvah* with the enfranchisement of women in the body politic of Jewish life. We will also disagree on how to balance the distinctiveness which is inevitably a component of *mitzvah*-bound communities with our concomitant desire to participate in the broad cultural, intellectual and artistic richness of American life. And finally, a commitment to *mitzvah* does not require one particular theology. Those American Jews who already take *mitzvah* seriously have already constructed a variety of theologies as foundations for their commandedness. That is where the genius of American Jewish pluralism shines, and nothing about a return to *mitzvah* mandates an end to that creativity.

Orthodoxy is not the issue here; *mitzvah* is. *Mitzvah* is the key to the passion, the uniqueness and the excitement which American Jews desperately want. A Judaism that will draw another generation of American

Jews will have to look very different from what we sought to create in the last half century. That is an enormous challenge. But the rewards--individually and communally--will be well worth the struggle. □

## End Thoughts

### A trip home

Edward D. Levin

This past summer, I went back to Pennsylvania for a family reunion. My mother had told me that the old synagogue in Donora, Pennsylvania that we attended when I was growing up, was down to just a few older members and would probably close within the next year. Donora is a small town in southwestern Pennsylvania built on a hillside along a bend in the Monongahela River about 25 miles south of Pittsburgh. It was founded in the early part of the century to support the new US Steel mill built along this part of the river. It was thriving, hardworking and dirty from the mill. About 12,000 people lived there. Jews were an integral part of the town serving as doctors, lawyers, pharmacists, store owners and even one policeman.

Ohav Shalom Synagogue was founded in 1911. It was an Orthodox *shul* holding onto its part of the hill on Second Street. I remember going to Sunday School there with my brother and sisters in the early and mid-sixties. Everyone knew everyone and the older kids taught the younger kids, starting out coloring pictures of Moses. There was a busy clamor of voices, and there wasn't enough room for all the classes to meet. Younger kids were taught in the cloak room.

### Memories

Upstairs was the sanctuary, a climb up steep stairs that creaked and had a wobbly banister. No boy or man could enter the sanctuary without a *yarmulke*. If there were none, you had to put your hand on your head until you

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found one. The rabbis I remember as a child were at once dark and foreboding but nearer to God than us kids. We were taught the stories of Judaism but only heard the chanting of the prayers in a language we did not understand.

The approach to the front of the sanctuary was beyond my approach. It was partly due to the fact that my parents were a mixed marriage. My mother was Roman Catholic and was excommunicated when she married my father, a Jew. We were raised as Jews and allowed to attend Sunday School but neither my brother nor I were permitted to become *b'nei mitzvah*.

### Beyond Donora

About 1965, the steel mill closed, and Donora began its decline. Many families moved away. Older people stayed, but practically all young people with any sense tried their best to move away as soon as they came of age. Of course, no one new moved in to town. The Sunday School closed, and we joined the Conservative synagogue in the next town which subsequently became Reform. I went to college and, like most of my friends, moved away.

Becoming an academic, I went on to live in many parts of the country and didn't think much about my Jewish upbringing and was not affiliated with a synagogue. I had thoughts of a spiritual nature but connected them more to science and philosophy than with Judaism.

Four years ago, I came to North Carolina with my wife, Risa, and my daughter, Holly. We joined Judea Reform for a sense of community and to provide a good Jewish environment for our daughter. Holly started Sunday School. There was a busy clamor of voices, and there wasn't enough room for all the classes to meet. This was a thriving hardworking community. The big difference from when I was growing up was not the lack of the soot from the steel mill of Donora but the access to the front of the sanctuary. The rabbi was forbearing rather than foreboding, and guided rather than guarded approaches to Judaism and God. I enrolled in the *anshe mitzvah* class and celebrated my *bar mitzvah* last year at age 39. Discussing aspects of God and religion late into

the night with my classmates and reading from the Torah on Shabbat morning in front of the congregation provided the means for my re-entry into Jewish life.

### The Tradition Continues

During my visit back to Pennsylvania last August, I called an old family friend to ask about the *shul* in Donora. He said that they still manage to get a *minyan* together every Saturday morning, and he invited me to come to services. I went with my oldest sister. They apparently have come to dispense with some of the rigors of old. She was asked to sit with me up in front of the glass partition in the men's section. We sat in the last row.

I followed along the service with these old men, and they asked if I'd like an *aliyah*. I said that I'd like to say the Torah blessing. The walk up the aisle to the *bimah* was surprisingly easy, and the Hebrew came well. It was nice to be among the readers of the Torah in my home town. But the idea that finally becoming a full part of the Jewish community of Donora just when it was about to end was hard. Ohav Shalom will close soon. Our temple may buy one of their Torah crowns. This would help provide a fund for perpetual care for their cemetery. One of our old family friends asked me to help design a memorial for the Holocaust victims to put on the *yahrzeit* plaque. They have no rabbi, so he asked if mine would help with an appropriate Torah quote.

Back in North Carolina, just before Rosh Hashana, I thought about the cycle of the year and the cycle of life of Jewish communities. Ours is a growing and vibrant community. The problems we have, in large part, are the pains of growth and challenges of attaining maturity. As we develop our Jewish life here in North Carolina, we should remember that as individual people are born, live and die, so do individual communities. The best we can do is to instill in our children the sense of God and Judaism which they can hold and nurture within them, here or in whichever communities carry on, and so contribute to the legacy of the Jewish people.

Our second daughter, Laura, has just gone to sleep. She will start Sunday School next year.

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**Sh'ma**

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