# From Ethnic to Spiritual: A Tale of Four Generations

**by Dr. Lawrence A. Hoffman**

**From the Synagogue 2000 Library**

Our long-term goal is the spiritualization of the North American synagogue. Whatever kind of congregation we attend, whatever our movement or ideological allegiance, we all have this in common: we are on a Jewish quest for a better tomorrow, and to judge by all the evidence, we are a generation in search of the spiritual.

## Of Generations and of Projects

Authentic Jewish spirituality does exist. It is not just rhetoric, and it is not anti-intellectual. It is a genuine part of life, akin to the arts, reflected in ritual, and celebrated in moments of personal transcendence. It is implicit in moments when we know somehow that we are not alone; that life has direction, purpose, and hope; that we are part of a healing community that cares. The questions to which we will return again and again are how to infuse this spiritual ambience into our synagogues --- and why we need to do it now.

I turn here to the latter question, ``Why now?" Charles Dickens once made literary history with, ``A Tale of Two Cities." I invite you now to make spiritual history with your own story, ``A Tale of Four Generations." Each of us exemplifies a whole larger than our individual selves: we are all part of a generation of seekers, who share the project of making spiritual meaning. Let me speak, then, of generations and of projects.

A generation is more than a random group of people who happen to be born at the same time. Such a group would be just a statistical category called a cohort. We are all, by chance, a particular cohort, like the cohort born between 1975 and 1980, or the cohort who reached maturity on the eve of World War II. Cohort attribution is arbitrary, potentially insignificant. But the *generation* to which we belong matters; it matters supremely. A generation is a group of people who may never have met but who know they share something important. They encapsulate a little bit of history that is theirs, because it is what directs their lives. They may be of different cohorts --- born, that is, at different times, related as parents and children (or even as grandchildren) to each other. But they are one generation nonetheless, because they have been present at the unfolding of their own unique chapter of history. They may be ``local generations," like the generation of the San Francisco fire, or more recently (1993), the generation of the Midwest floods. But generations may be geographically broader in scope as well, as

when we say that most of us were once the Cold War generation; or now we are the generation that saw the Iron Curtain crumble. We may also be the Vietnam generation, as our parents were the generation of the Great Depression.

The generation we are leaves its mark on us for all time. Members of the depression generation, for instance, do not throw things out; they save them in dusty attics or moldy basements, in case they or their children ever need them. (They never do). An Israeli veteran of the old *yishuv* tells me he never lets the water run; how could he, with the rarity of water etched in his being from the days when all of Israel was a desert? Soldiers of the Cold War never even quite fade away --- they continue to keep guard over American democracy forever, always suspicious that the Russian Bear will bestir itself again. The Vietnam generation will never trust its government with the same naive passion that the Roosevelt generation invested in its FDR, much of whose presidency was illusion (truth be told), but unlike the Vietnam debacle, a happy one where a crippled chief executive looked superhuman, and we had nothing to fear but fear itself.

Jews too have their ways of counting generations, and in so far as we are both Jewish and American (or Canadian, British, or anything else), we are part of overlapping generational events that jointly make us who we are. More than the Vietnam generation, I am the generation of the Six Day War, for instance, as my parents were the generation of the Shoah. Imagine your life charted as the coordinates of several generational events: your own, certainly, but also touched by the radiating influence of the generation you called your parents'. You are therefore the generation of the Six Day War and of the rescue of Soviet Jewry, but also of the Shoah and its aftermath; You are autonomous, you think; you decide your own destiny. That is true only in part, because you react necessarily to the cataclysmic affairs into which you are born. If you are Jewish, you cannot escape some relationship to Hitler's inferno, to Ben Gurion's vision, and now to the agenda forced upon us internally as members of Jewish North America --- to which I shall return shortly.

For what we are is more than what we individually plan on being. Life is what happens while we are busy doing something else, as the saying goes. We are regularly buffeted by waves of history that we neither plan nor anticipate. They mold our generation, and they define our project.

A *project* is the second way we have for determining our place in history. By ``project," we mean something greater in scope and in design than just our work. We do not all have the luxury of conceptualizing a project. Slaves in Auschwitz made do from moment to moment; they were lucky to stay alive. The poor who huddle beneath New York's Brooklyn Bridge have no project; they just make it through the night. Children have no project; they move from moment to moment at parental whim. But adults who surpass the most elemental stage of animal need make up projects; that is our glory. God had projects; so do we; we are created in the image of God. A project is the connective tissue that gives enduring worth to the individual acts of labor that fill our days. When we despair of what we are about, it is because we have lost sight of our project. When we know somehow we matter, it is because we glimpse a larger pattern to our work. We

``project'' ourselves upon the larger screen of human history, or at least upon some temporal expanse beyond the moment.

Human conduct is therefore filled with the divining of a project. We join a cause that stands for something larger than ourselves; build a home and decorate it with mementos of a life --- family photos on the wall, and scrap book pictures of vacation spots, the relics of times and spaces we touched, reminders of the links that make us who we are.

Poet Laureate of the Jewish People, A.M. Klein, says of his and our Jewish quest for a project greater than ourselves, ``I lift my visor. Know me who I am,'' for ``Not sole was I born.'' Rather,

[to those] that begat me...
This body is residence. Corpuscular,
They dwell in my veins, they eavesdrop at my ear,
They circle, as with Torahs, round my skull,
In exit and in entrance all day long pull.
The latches of my heart descend, and rise ---
And there look generations through my eyes.
(Psalm 36: A Psalm touching Genealogy)

When we die, our heirs insist on taking stock of who we were, what we did, what we amounted to. People talk about us when we ourselves can no more say anything at all. ``He loved his family,'' the rabbi says, in a eulogy that captures someone's project; or, ``What a mother, daughter, sister, our beloved was.'' Our eulogies would no doubt surprise us, could we hear them. ``Your father was a builder, patriarch and hero,'' says the rabbi to the grieving daughter. ``Was he?'' she wonders briefly? ``Is that what made him do whatever it was he did when he left home each morning?'' Her father has been granted a posthumous project; his life makes sense now; the children put closure on who he was, maybe identify his project with their own, or move on to consider what they shall become.

Without a project, we are barely human: servants of time and circumstance. We humans seek something more of life, something momentous, not just momentary.

People of a single generation share a project. That is what unites them. Their lives take shape along a single vector. Take the Vietnam Generation: they are either for the war or against it, but they must take a stand on one side or the other; or the Roosevelt generation, which never quite gives up on the promise of the New Deal; just as members of the Kennedy generation ask over and over again what they can do for their country, not what their country can do for them. Projects differ within generational representatives, naturally. It is not the same for men as for women; for old-timers and for newcomers; for the young and the old. But despite our differences, if we share a generation, we share also the everlasting impact of the historical waves that make it up, and we cannot avoid sharing too the projects that those waves of time have dumped upon the shores of our lives.

So all of us in **Synagogue 2000,** young or old, men or women, share a project, because we are a generation: the fourth generation of Jews to occupy North American space and time, as it happens. We have decided to pursue our project together. Let us look back at the generations that came before us, to see how our project matches theirs, yet how different we must be if we are to remain as true as they were to the hand of history that destiny deals to us.

## Generation One: The Founders

It helps to have some dates in mind, but dates are arbitrary. Dating by decades is at least convenient, however, starting with our own and looking backward. Also helpful is the Bible's generational calculus. There too we find ``generations," the generation of the flood, as the Rabbis put it, or the generation of the dispersion, meaning those who lived at history's putative beginning, touched forever after by their failure to erect a Tower of Babel. Assume that both are myths; there never was a Noah (though there may have been a flood), and there is no Tower of Babel. But there must have been generations whose project was the kind of thing that floods and towers can explain. Live through a flood, and you never again take life's steady course for granted. Your project is to build upon the shores of an eroded past. As for Babel, here we have the way in which our ancestors took stock of human particularity. Why should we all be different? Why are we not all one people, with one language and one scrap book of the things that made us who we are? The generation of the dispersion explains the human project that anthropologists know as culture.

Generations come and go, even by the biblical count, but when its authors think in rounded numbers, they estimate a generation as about forty years. More specifically, forty is the number used to indicate growing up. Every forty years, a new generation exercises its own turn at leadership.

So let us count back forty years from where we are today, then forty years more, and forty years more still, to get back to the first generation of the four that will concern us here. If the high-water mark of our generation is the 1990s, then Generation Three to which we are heir reached maturity in the 1950s, their parental generation left its mark from 1910 to 1920, and the first generation etched its project in the stones of time somewhere in the 1870s.

To be sure, Jews had been coming to America for a long time prior. Sefardic immigrants arrived from the Brazilian port city of Recife as early as 1654. They had moved there from Holland when the Dutch controlled the area (1630-1654), but had to leave when Catholic Portugal took it from the Dutch, and imported to it the hated Inquisition. Threatened now with criminal investigation leading to the *auto da fe* (burning at the stake), Jewish refugees made their way by ship to what lay still in Dutch control, the city of New Amsterdam (later New York) under the governorship of Peter Stuyvesant. Against his will, Stuyvesant admitted these first Jewish settlers, and with that act, North American Jewish history had begun.

But Sefardic founders were virtually overrun by German immigrants who began arriving shortly after 1815 when the Congress of Vienna ended the Napoleonic wars. Under Napoleon, Jews had been led to believe that all things were possible. Napoleon had convened a great council (or Sanhedrin) whose purpose it was to hail the new era in which Jews as national citizens of the Jewish faith had a place. But with Napoleon's demise, Jewish hopes collapsed. In an age known primarily for its reactionary politics and its nascent racist doctrines, Jews were relegated once again to the margins of European life. No wonder many of them came here. Napoleonic enlightenment still ruled here in the form of Jefferson, Madison, and other early founders of American political theory. While German statesmen went about the business of returning Germany to the Germans, Jefferson outfitted Washington with neo-classical architecture that reflected universal reason common to us all. The first German Jews to arrive were thus enraptured by America's promise. Their project, simply put, was to make it here.

European liberals tried one more time to wrest Europe from the hands of the reactionaries. When their attempted revolution of 1848 died, a second stream of German Jews admitted defeat and headed to America to join the German emigrés already here. The latter had followed the course of the revolution in the press, which reported the battles fought by democratic partisans on the ramparts of the very cities where America's Jewish readers had once lived and whose curvatures and alleyways they knew by heart. Some even went home to Europe to usher in the messianic era that was surely on its way. When no messiah came, they washed their hands of Europe once and for all, and returned home to New York and Baltimore. This time, they were joined by the second wave of Germans just now migrating westward.

If they met on the boat across the Atlantic, these two groups of Germans would have had much in common, but something subtle divided them as well. Unlike the Jews who had left immediately after Napoleon's defeat, the second wave brought with them the dream of German culture at its best, not just universal reason the likes of which the old-time French revolutionaries had pushed and Jefferson had echoed. They too adopted the project of making it here, but making it for them meant making it as Germans in America. Thus was born the ambivalent project of German Jewry: to make it in the new world without actually giving up the old; to be a Jew, a German Jew, but to be American also.

What it meant to be American was clear enough. Separation of church and state dictated the contours of America's claim on people --- they were citizens of a modern state, just as Napoleon had foreseen in his abortive fling with modernity. But what did it mean to be Jewish? In Europe it had many meanings: religion, certainly, but also peoplehood, ethnicity, separatist community, a way of life. America in the 1800s, however, was in love with religion. Founded by religious people in the first place, America insisted on religious identity for its citizens. By 1830, for instance, forty years before the high point of Generation One, America was in the throes of a Great Awakening. Preachers starting in upper New York State had been steadily migrating westward, gathering enormous crowds wherever they went. As the new decade dawned, the largest such gathering ever held had massed in a place called Cane Ridge, Kentucky, where Evangelical

Protestantism made its greatest one-time stand. That same year, Joseph Smith announced that he had been visited by an angel with the good news that this new land of the United States was actually the land of promise, the new Israel (no less); the people he would lead were the lost ten tribes. Until the Civil War, religious consciousness would give us utopian communities in bucolic communes on the one hand and militant abolitionists for whom life was an all-out war against the devil, on the other. Thanks to Madison who had rejected any possible religion of the state, Protestantism had been splintered into warring factions, each one now a self- determined church: Maryland's old-time Catholics, for instance, or the Methodists and Baptists who stormed the expanding American frontier making souls. Jews of the time took it as part of their project too, that they should become a ``church," American style.

Epitomizing Generation One was the founder of founders, Isaac Mayer Wise. As early as 1855, just one year after he had left Albany for Cincinnati and eight years after coming here from his native Bohemia, he had called a conference in Cleveland for the purpose of forging America's disparate Jews into a Union. By the 1870s, the decade we have singled out as the high point for the generation whom Wise led, he tried again, and by 1875, he was the president not only of a Union of American Hebrew Congregations but also of a Hebrew Union College, whose mission it was to provide Jewish clergy just as Princeton did for Presbyterians or Harvard for Unitarians.

By 1880, the project of the German founders was largely finished. Its ideological cornerstones would be published as the Pittsburgh Platform five years later, but its institutional bastions were firmly set in place. In the 1770s, America itself was born; one hundred years later, its Jewish founders served their institutional notice that they too had arrived. Their project was successful; they had indeed made it here.

## Generation Two: Preserving Peoplehood

What the German founders never did appreciate was the positive pull of peoplehood on the Jewish psyche. How could they? When they arrived here, their claim to belonging was precisely the fact that they were not a people at all; they were a religion. That claim had been implicit in the Enlightenment all along. Even Moses Mendelssohn had known that. Back in the early 1700s he would meet on a Shabbat afternoon for a friendly game of chess with his Catholic friend, Father Lavater, rejoicing in his new-found Prussian residency that he could and did justify only because he was a man of reason and as such, deserved equal rights before God. As to nationality, however, he was a German. He spoke German, therefore, and even translated the Bible into German so that his fellow German Jews could read it in translation. When Lavater tried nonetheless to convert him to Christianity, Mendelssohn responded that he preferred to remain a Jew, not because the Jewish *People* had any claim upon him, but because Judaism as a *religion* was so perfectly rational that he could think of no reason why any rational thinking soul would want to leave it.

By the time the French Revolution had furthered this noble Enlightenment goal, even massive revolution against the old order was being justified by shouts of ``Liberté,

Egalité, Fraternité," all worthy values if (and only if) all human beings really are free, equal and fraternal --- which is to say, members of the same family, all one people, so to speak, the people of God known also as the human race, but divided into national enclaves called states purely for purposes of administration. Napoleon thus overturned age-old national boundary markers --- the rivers and valleys that accidentally staked off one duchy from another. Starting from scratch, he subdivided Europe into squares called consistories, each of which corresponded to nothing deeper than lines of arbitrary latitude and longitude. Forget the age-old claims made by Europe's several peoples, the German *Volk*, for instance, which could and should be swallowed up into the international and wholly rational redrawn map of Europe. The Sanhedrin of Jews that assembled in Paris on February 4, 1807, told Napoleon exactly what he wanted to hear when it announced it was a religion, and implicitly renounced any and all claims of Jewish Peoplehood.

To some extent the second migration of Germans had watered down these radical claims of the Enlightenment. Having lived through the reactionary era that denied Napoleonic geography, they had experienced the reassertion of the German *Volk.* Only by the 1880s would that nationalism flare up into full-fledged anti-Semitism, which Jews tried to ignore as a passing fancy, in any case. They celebrated their identity as both Jews (by religion) and Germans (by national culture). Religion was one thing; citizenship and loyalty to the United States were another; but national culture was yet a third. Until the First World War, German Americans (Jews included) saw no conflict between their European culture and their American home. As late as 1900, 90% of the Lutherans in the mid-west still worshipped in their European language, not in English. In 1816, the philosopher Hegel was appointed to the coveted chair of philosophy at the University of Heidelberg, where he taught that history reached its zenith in the German state. By 1870, Hegel had been dead for 39 years, but he was alive and well among German Jews who agreed with him absolutely, to the point of doubting whether anything worth while could be expected from a cultural backwater such as the United States, without Germanic culture to help it along.

As much as German Jews celebrated their German heritage, they were ambivalent about their Jewish tradition, which looked far too medieval to be proudly displayed as the equal of what Germanic culture seemed to offer. Modern Jewish scholars therefore spent the century redeploying the literary output of the Rabbis, featuring the things they liked and ignoring what they didn't. They coined the term ``Golden Age'' for Spain, because Spain had given us philosophy and poetry, the highest cultural carriers as German aesthetics viewed them. Rabbi David Einhorn of Baltimore composed the forerunner for the *Union Prayer Book* almost solely in German, and he epitomized his generation of rabbis by delivering flowery (and long!) German sermons to German auditors who were supposed to identify progress with the spirit of Germanic culture. He was by no means ashamed of his Jewish heritage, even though the heritage he championed was a selective perception of what Judaism really had been. He preached a kind of Judaism that resembled Germanism, which he regarded as the model for cultural value and the standard to which Jewish creativity should strive. He was all three: an American by citizenship, a Jew by religion, and German by culture.

By the end of our high water decade of the 1870s, that purely religious view of Judaism was about to be challenged by the largest wave of Jewish immigrants ever to move to one place at one time. They would stand the entire German scheme of things on its head. Whereas the German project entailed building Judaism as a religion, the new immigrants, from eastern Europe, came here with almost no regard for religion at all. We distort reality if we picture only pious Chasidic synagogues on New York's Lower East Side. It takes a mere instant to discover that the whole tenement district is dominated by the building that once housed *The Daily Forward,* hardly a bastion of religion. The stone facade above its door now carries Korean characters affixed by new owners who bought it from the Jews, but scrape away the Korean (and the Chinese under that), and you find the carved-out images of the people who really mattered to the eastern Europeans: not Moses and Abraham but the American socialist leader who ran for president five times, Eugene V. Debs (1855--1926) and his German equivalent Rosa Luxemburg (1871--1919)! Some of these Russian Jews trashed the whole Jewish project, so enamored were they of the rival Marxist promise of a classless society --- the second *aliyah* to Israel actually kept May Day more than they did Yom Kippur. But most remained true to Jewish identity, being careful only to differentiate ``Jewish'' from ``religious.'' It was religion that they despised. They were Jewish as a matter of peoplehood.

They arrived at that conclusion because Napoleon did not triumph in eastern Europe. The transformation of Judaism into a matter of modern western *faith* occurred only in the western orbit of the Parisian Sanhedrin, never in the *yeshivot* of Vilna and Volhynia, and certainly not among the rank and file socialists, the intellectual Yiddishists, the land-intoxicated Zionists, or any of the other ideological *luftmenschen* who argued their way through every passing day. For sure, the idea that we are just a religion never dawned on the masses, whether or not they attended the synagogues and *shtuebels* of the time. Neither classical Hebrew nor Yiddish even has a native ``Jewish'' word for ``religion'' as western thought understands it. Religion is a western concept through and through, a generalization offered up by 18th- and 19th-century academe in its quest for the equivalents of Protestantism among the peoples of the world. It is what western Jews decided they must be, if Napoleon was not to kick them out; what German Jews had to aspire to if they were to rate citizenship in the Prussian state.

Eastern European Jews knew instead they were a people, a nationality like the other groups who constituted Czarist Russia and after that the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. ``Republics,'' note! Like Latvians, Lithuanians, Ukrainians, and Bessarabians --- national groupings all, peoples, with customs and a language and a land, all their own. No wonder debate among the Jews who filled the Eastern European coffee-houses focussed on the Zionist question of land, the missing ingredient in the Jewish equation if Jews like the others were to be a licit *people,* not only a *religion.*

Both in the west and in the east, therefore, modern Jewish strategy circled round the question of how to justify inclusion in the body politic. In the west, inclusion meant being a religion, so the west gave us religious reform, a means by which Jews who had a medieval thing called Judaism could emerge with that medievalism retooled and reshaped into western style religion. In the east, it was land, not religion, that was missing, so there

Jewish thinkers divided into ``territorialists'' who wanted to carve out a Jewish state in eastern Europe (where Yiddish, the language of the masses would be spoken), and Zionists who insisted on returning to the land of our ancestors (and their ancient language also).

In any case, *religious* reform did not capture the attention of Generation Two, who came to these shores not to seek religion but to celebrate peoplehood. Here they needed no separate land. They did, however, establish Yiddish theater, a Yiddish press, and a fully Yiddish ambience without much religion, for which they (frequently as socialists anyway) had little regard.

But they quickly discovered that Jews here were expected to have a religion. This was a Protestant country after all, and Protestants knew a religion when they saw one. German reformers were aghast at the very thought that their eastern European cousins would join them in their Temples, but eastern Europeans were equally offended by the Protestantized religiosity that Reform temples had developed. So a compromise was reached. Wealthy Reform bankers bailed out a bankrupt place called The Jewish Theological Seminary, making that the home for eastern European Jewish strivings. By 1910, the beginning of the emblematic decade for Generation Two, Jews had settled into a happy divide: western European Jews in Reform Temples where Judaism as a faith was preached, and Judaism as a variant version of Protestant religion was celebrated; and eastern European Jews in Conservative synagogues, where Judaism as an ethnic enterprise reigned supreme.

Mordecai Kaplan's Reconstructionism was the logical consequence of Conservative Judaism, as we might expect from this American master who arrived at his ideas while teaching homiletics at the Jewish Theological Seminary itself. If Judaism is essentially a people's ethnic folkways, Judaism must be not just a religion but a civilization. In America, where even peoples ought to have religions, it must be a religious civilization. Synagogues should be more than sanctuaries, then. They should be gathering places for the clan, houses of assembly, even community centers of a mildly religious sort. How ironic that Kaplan, the most American of all Jewish thinkers, influenced most by Thomas Dewey and American pragmatism, should have missed the very essence of America's religiosity, its insistence on religion as the dominating hallmark of what Jews must be.

Much much later, his Reconstructionist descendants would modify his radicalism, inviting, as president, Arthur Green, a religious seeker rooted in the very Chasidic mystical tradition that Kaplan's rationalism deplored. The changeover in approach had been heralded when the federation of *chavurot* had joined the ranks of the old-time Reconstructionist Movement. But in the heyday of Generation Two, the era when Conservative Judaism was just being born and Kaplan's ideas were only coming into being, these developments were a long way off. No one would then have predicted just how much even eastern European Jews would return to religion as a source of their identity. That return is the essence of the spiritual quest that dominates the Fourth Generation of our time. But before turning to ourselves, we need to analyze the Third Generation, which reached its pinnacle in the suburbs in the 1950s.

## Generation Three: Suburbs and Survival

By 1950, American Jews had settled down into two competing visions of what Judaism ought to be. Intermarriage between Germans and Russians veiled the divide to some extent, as did the very vastness of the eastern European numbers which overflowed into the German temples, despite their organ music, strange decorum, and other trappings of a liturgy laundered of its traditionalism. But Jews had to join some ``place of worship'' after all, as Eisenhower himself made clear, in a decade that was to rival even the 1830s in its reclamation of religion as a grand American spiritual pastime.

America's mid-century religious revival had many causes, not the least of which was the Red Scare that captured the national imagination. Those were the days when grade-school children practiced air-raid drills and a senator from Wisconsin shouted wild accusations from the House Unamerican Activities Committee. Eisenhower shared McCarthy's fear of godless communism, as we see from his refusal to grant clemency to Julius and Ethel Rosenberg. Rabbi Abraham Cronbach, a professor at Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati, a devotee of spirituality, and a pacifist after World War I, recollects visiting Eisenhower in the White House to plead that the chief executive commute the death sentence. He appealed to the overwhelming popularity of the president, saying, ``Only you have the power and the stature to prevent an execution that will divide Americans just when we need our unity most.'' But Eisenhower was unmoved. This was war, he reasoned, a cold war, but a war nonetheless. Likening the Rosenbergs to ``traitors'' who allowed fear to paralyze them into inactivity on the battlefield, he asked, ``Do you know what we did to those people? We killed them.'' End of matter.

But Eisenhower was also religious in his own right. He was a personal friend of Billy Graham, whom he invited to the White House. He had the Pledge of Allegiance altered to include, ``Under God.'' Referring to himself as ``the most religious man I have ever met,'' he called on every American to belong to some religion, any religion, but at least a religion. Religion was good; Communists were bad; Communists had no religion. Again: end of matter.

So Americans flocked in droves to church and synagogue, and they did so not just to the places their parents had built. They were busy using post-war largesse to buy all the things they had done without for six years, not to mention all the things they never knew existed but were being newly peddled as part of the post-war economy retooled to serve a ravenous peacetime hunger: refrigerators, washing machines, television sets, new cars and homes --- yes, homes, in the suburbs that were opening up everywhere. Most Americans who were alive back then remember to this day the commercials featuring Dinah Shore, singing, ``See the USA, in your Chevrolet.'' Most of us missed the point. She was actually selling us the interstate highway system, whose ribbons of roads brought Jews to the beltway and beyond, often into communities that hitherto had belonged to the American elite who could afford second homes and country club addresses for the weekend. Now even the upstart Jews were coming. Remember Philip Roth's Potamkin family from *Goodbye Columbus?* They were the stereotypical new-rich

Jewish family of Long Island, Mr. Potamkin a junk dealer who had made good but lacked Gentile civility. Roth's characters were caricatures, of course, the children of Jews from Russia, so usually Conservative --- indeed, Conservative Judaism dwarfed Reform in the 1950s, and still does in areas like Long Island where to this very day, Judaism as ethnicity is the legacy of the eastern European wave of immigrants. But Roth's Potamkin, bumbling as he does to learn what has been called ``the Gentile Halakhah of civility," epitomizes the tale of Jews who had to learn the ways of the country, and did so, in part, by building synagogues across from wherever it was that their Protestant neighbors built their churches. Children of immigrants who had little use for religion, they now discovered Judaism as their version of ``religion, any religion," as demanded from the Oval Office.

But Jews did more. Their response to the suburbs was partly just like that of everyone else at the time, but it was also uniquely Jewish. The part shared with others was the fact that Jews and non-Jews alike were having children in record numbers. Women who had postponed having children during the war now joined their younger sisters in together producing the largest population of children America had ever seen, the baby-boom generation, which dominates American life to this day. The boomers peaked in 1957, but attitude surveys reveal a divide that breaks them into two cohorts, early and late, divided by the birth year of 1954. If you were born from 1945 to 1954, you are an early boomer; if you came into the world from 1954 to 1965, you are part of the second wave. Either way, you are a generation, Generation Four, to which I shall shortly turn. You are a reaction, however, to the project of Generation Three, your parents, who discovered inexpensive paperbacks among the postwar material goodies, and savored especially a manual for parenting by Dr. Spock. The doctor taught them that everything should be sacrificed for the children, a position with which Madison Avenue heartily concurred, as it targeted the baby-boomers as the first cohort of children to be expressly considered in ad campaigns. Indeed, those ad campaigns have followed Generation Four throughout its life. And what was good for Dr. Spock and Madison Avenue was equally good for synagogues, who also targeted children, via new school wings that dwarfed the tiny sanctuaries to which they were adjoined.

The parents who had never been trained to appreciate religion anyway wanted it only for their children, so rabbis went back to school to learn how to be educators; that way, they would matter. Adults barely bothered with religion for themselves; they had joined synagogues just because Eisenhower said they should. Belonging was the American thing to do; going was another matter, especially since services were held on Friday night and Saturday morning when suburban life offered other options that appealed more and were in keeping with the children-first ethos: take the kids to little league, or shopping, or piano lessons. Everything for the children.

That much was shared with Christian suburbanites as well. Churches too catered to the not-yet-adult crowd. But Jews had their own take on the situation. Only Jews had to come to terms at the same time with the Shoah. I remember growing up in the late '40s and '50s, seeing survivors come to town. I would look up at their tattooed arms, and hear my parents murmur things like, ``The camps." Usually they said nothing at all --- just looked

at each other. I later found out that they debated adopting a war baby. In the end, they decided not to, but their dilemma epitomizes what we were going through then. We had lost 6,000,000, a number higher than anyone had ever counted. Nowadays, everyone throws around big numbers with abandon: billions of kilowatts, bytes, even dollars. But back then, six million was a big number. It meant more than it does now. And it meant Jews, a lot of them, killed under our noses, while American war planes wouldn't even bomb the gas chambers.

So American Jews had a special reason to have a lot of children, to educate them in synagogue schools, and to shower everything we owned on making sure they would grow to Jewish adulthood. Theologian Emil Fackenheim captured our poignant anguish when he charged us with this altogether novel postwar *mitzvah:* not to give Hitler a posthumous victory. We sort of knew that anyway. And that is why Jews, especially, manufactured what can only be called ``pediatric religion," Judaism for the children.

Simultaneously, we turned to saving Jews elsewhere. The war was over; the killing of Jews was not. There were ``DP's" (as my father called them) over there in Cyprus and wandering throughout Poland, all of them looking for a home when there was none. If Generation Three had been intent on peoplehood before, it was doubly or triply so now: its project loomed large and unmistakable. It had to save the Jewish People. Having children and educating them was the priority at home; securing the State of Israel and marching for Soviet Jews became our foreign policy. Generation Three thus virtually abandoned synagogues except as way-stations for their children's Jewish education.

Jewish life revolved about what came to be known as an altogether novel Jewish religion, the religion of UJA: the Jewish People as a corporate entity with its own corporate economy allocated with corporate efficiency, none of which synagogues could deliver. We thus invested in corporate Judaism, and designed a novel calendar rich in days like Yom Hashoah, Yom Ha'atzma'ut, and even Super Sunday. For rituals, we had missions and marches. We moved life- cycle celebrations to Masada or the Wall --- synagogues could educate our children, but the actual sacred rite of passage would take place on sacred ground. Synagogues complained as they watched their best and brightest abandon them for headier pursuits in Federation councils, but truth be told, synagogues were increasingly irrelevant and Federation Judaism wasn't. If we have moved to a new project now, it is because Israel is secure, or nearly so, we pray, and the Soviet Union is no more. We have airlifted Jews to safety from Yemen, Ethiopia, and a host of lesser known cities and settlements, the latest being beleaguered outposts in Chechnya. That stuff comes easily to us; ``Oh," we say, not without the hint of the pride that everyone felt with Entebbe, ``Leave it to Israel to do that." But we move on, as we must in life, and so it is that Generation Four, raised in marches by their parents, have moved on to a Jewish project of their own.

The secret of that project comes from a tale that Rabbi Sheldon Zimmerman tells about his mother who used to feed him castor oil every night at bedtime. One day, he says, he had an epiphany rivalling the visions of Isaiah and Jeremiah. It suddenly dawned on him that his mother gave him the castor oil but never took any herself.

So too, through all those years of childhood education in the synagogue, despite the millions of dollars poured into classrooms and the thousands of education degrees awarded to rabbis, the grand lesson learned by kids of Generation Four was that Judaism was like castor oil; their parents never took any.

Jews in Generation Four have had to pioneer religion all over again. Their grandparents of Generation Two, the ones who came from Russia, had no use for it; their parents in the suburbs never took it. Yet simultaneously with this insight came an unprecedented American return to religion, a search for the spiritual that no one could have predicted. In its own way, it is like a wave of internal immigration. If the Sefardim came first, followed by Germans and then Russians, we now have an even larger immigration stream: I mean the empowerment of women and of Jews by choice. We don't think of them as immigrants, because they are not foreign-born. But in terms of their involvement in Jewish life, they are foreign indeed. Until this generation, women were never seen as rabbis or around the boardrooms of Jewish life, and ``Jew-by-choice'' was an exercise in self-contradiction. In Generation Four, these two groups do indeed constitute the latest example of a migration. They more than double the ranks of the pool from which to select the leaders who will determine the destiny of the Jewish People. One very interesting Jewish statistic from American annals is the fact that women have always supported religion far more than men have. And Jews by choice choose Judaism as a religion, not as an ethnic group.

## Generation Four: Spirituality Seekers

The search for spirituality transcends the empowerment of women and Jews by choice, of course. It is inextricably linked to larger demographic changes that began to be felt in the 1960s when the first phalanx of baby-boomers came of age. Those same men and women are now in their forties, and are but one of three cohorts who stand out as altogether novel.

The baby-boomers themselves are the most evident of the three, if only because of their population size. There are more of them than of anyone else, and they are entering the age range of 45 to 60, the age, that is, when people generally begin to exercise power. To some extent, society has always followed their lead, and now that they are successful executives (including in their number even the president and vice-president of the United States), they are setting the agenda for the country as a whole. They learned early that the world was supposed to provide them with their needs, and although their needs may have changed, their expectation that they should be catered to has not.

Then there are the other two cohorts, the men and women just older and just younger than the boomers. The former are the boomers' parents, blessed with old age beyond what anyone might have predicted prior to the rise of miracle drugs in the sixties and beyond. We have never known as many old people, especially old people who have spent virtually their entire adult life working hard to care for their children, but giving little thought to themselves. They are not used to building their own lives as if they mattered. From their children's perspective, these aging parents are too dependent. They want

nightly phone calls, news from the grandchildren, and help in the complexities of medical bills, estate planning, and just plain growing older here where change happens faster than they are comfortable with.

Finally, there are the older baby-boomers' children, the twenty-somethings. Once upon a time, middle-class Americans thought they knew by age twenty-five what they would be doing for the rest of their lives. Not any more. If, by adolescence, we mean ``physically adult but still dependent on your elders," it can safely be said that we have expanded adolescence all the way to age thirty! Teenagers used to complete their education, then get married and (for men) join the work-force, striving for self-sufficiency. Now they can anticipate up to fifteen or more years in which they are financially dependent on their parents. They marry later and later, and have their first child after their parents had their last one. This third cadre of society makes up our final challenge. They too are searching for their adulthood in a society that seems increasingly hostile to their entry as self-sufficient contributing members, secure in their own ability to settle down in homes and families of their own, and to find their place in America's booming but shaky economic marketplace.

Noteworthy in all three cases is the element of free choice, which simply was not there in the first half of this century. Until the revolution that gave us rock 'n' roll, birth control pills, and the baby-boomers who benefited from them both, middle-class roles were largely fixed according to stereotypes bequeathed to us by our Victorian elders.

One element of that legacy was religious denominationalism. The ``church" (for us, the synagogue) had become a bastion of American life. It was something people were expected to belong to for life. When Eisenhower called on all Americans to belong to ``a church, any church," he was urging us to return to the old mentality that had preceded World War II and that we all considered normal. You knew in those days that you were a Catholic, a Lutheran, a Methodist or a Jew. You went to church or synagogue school, mixed with others like yourself, and then married them. Jews lived in Jewish areas, met other Jews at college, married in synagogues, and had Jewish children; Catholics did the same with Catholics, and Protestants too kept their distance, not only from Jews and Catholics but even from each other, Baptists preferring Baptists, and upper-class Episcopalians settling comfortably into the same churches that their parents had joined and their grandparents had built. Religious denominations were then hermetic structures sealed off from strangers who frequented other religions and were therefore different not only in belief but in their very being. Religious conversion was rare; intermarriage was rarer.

For a variety of reasons, the hermetic seals that surrounded religious identity began to crack somewhere in the 1960s and '70s. Within each religious grouping, polarization into right and left, conservative and liberal, began to occur. The mainline churches had taken leading roles in furthering the social agenda of the liberals in the civil rights era, and now conservatives were fighting back. The rise of the religious right has therefore contributed to the bifurcation of hitherto stable religious denominations, as conservative Baptists and conservative Episcopalians, for instance, saw themselves as allies for the first time, and

began to side with each other, but against the liberals in each of their respective camps. The liberals had long ago converged in their own interreligious alliances, marching together in civil rights demonstrations, for instance. Instead of thinking of themselves primarily as Lutherans, Catholics, or even as Jews, Americans began seeing themselves as liberals or conservatives, fighting a holy war for the good and the just in conjunction with like-minded citizens across religious lines.

Social solidarity of religious ethnic life is gone forever. Longstanding Reform Jews on Long Island's south shore, for instance, will tell you that they have little in common with the newly arrived Chasidim who regularly make them unsolicited offers to buy up their homes and lock up the area as an Orthodox citadel. But these same Jewish liberals share a lot with the liberal Christians whom they meet at work or at parties and who are equally threatened by the right wing of their own religious denominations. What goes for liberals goes for conservatives as well. The *New York Times* of June, 1993, reported that New York's Cardinal O'Connor was using Pat Robertson's list of evangelical Protestants for his mailings against abortion --- a moral position fully supported by Chasidic Jews as well. Once upon a time, Robertson had fulminated against papists, and the only thing right-wing Protestants and Catholics agreed upon was the need to convert Jews. Now all three parties support a host of positions, from anti-abortion, to an end to church-state separation. Yehudah Levin is an Orthodox rabbi from Brooklyn: seeing abortion as an outrage against God, he joined 800 protesters, including three other rabbis like himself, several Evangelical Protestant pastors and half a dozen Roman Catholic leaders, in an effort to close a Manhattan abortion clinic. ``When you have a secular society," Levin warns, ``you have the rapists and the muggers and the family breakers... We traditional Jews appreciate any positive efforts on behalf of the Christian clergy and leaders to protect moral standards." On the left and on the right, Jews have thus reached the point where the people with whom they share their values are not the people who are necessarily Jewish; while the ethnic or religious community that they have inherited is not the group with whom they count on sharing their deepest commitments.

But if ethnic Jewish solidarity is a thing of the past, so too is Catholic or Protestant solidarity. Religious identity is thus up for grabs. Instead of something into which we are born, religion is seen as something we choose; rightly or wrongly, it becomes less something to which we feel we owe allegiance, and more something on which we feel we can make a claim. It owes us, and if it doesn't deliver, we go elsewhere to get it.

With the demise of lifelong and certain religious identity, we have seen the death of guaranteed family and gender roles. Women, therefore, constitute a special case in this new world of ours where free choice and marketplace options have replaced traditional loyalties and inherited roles.

In the fifties, Jewish women had few choices in life. They were expected to attend college, meet husbands, get married, and have children --- all within a few years time. What happened after that, no one very much noticed. It was widely assumed that women's very nature outfitted them as natural nurturers of the family.

The notion that it is part of women's genetic makeup to stay home and care for the family does not go back as far as people imagine. It has its origins in the Victorian era. But becuase the high-water mark of Generation One (our founders) corresponded to the 1870s when Victorian values were rampant in our urban centers, the Victorian view of women was inculcated into our synagogue culture. Men did not attend synagogue very much in those days. They preferred their men's clubs: the B'nai B'rith, for instance, or lodges like the Freemasons or the Oddfellows. Women, however, were expected to take their children to the synagogue for moral training, and also to serve as synagogue volunteers in various charitable projects. Until the turn of the century, these projects were often large civic endeavors --- the equivalent of the Christian Temperance League among non-Jewish women, for instance --- but as the migrations of the 1900s swelled the ranks of the urban poor, professional social workers displaced the volunteer women, moving the women into subsidiary positions within their churches and synagogues. Our sisterhoods and women's auxiliaries arose, therefore, as a consequence of women's charity role being deflected away from the urban crises that professionals were handling, into the local efforts of synagogue maintenance and program.

By 1910 (the high-water mark for Generation Two), women had been relegated to the role of Victorian or Edwardian mothers on one hand, and synagogue volunteers on the other. Take Boston's venerable Temple Israel, for instance. One Saturday attendance in 1898 included ``1 man, 8 married women, 6 young women, 5 girls and 2 boys.'' What was true of Boston was true elsewhere as well, to the point where one contemporary observer opined that without the women who attended, sanctuaries would be empty. Rabbis preached largely to women as mothers and wives.

The most revealing sign of what happened when traditional American society collapsed in the sixties is the revolution in clothing that accompanied it. I think particularly of the staple of Victorian wear: the corset, designed to hold you in, but to make your constriction look natural. In the 1920s, Americans flirted with freedom and demonstrated it by outlandish styles of the flapper generation. The conservative fifties saw a return to suburban solidarity, but the corset effect was permanently withdrawn by the Vietnam years, when men and women began dressing the same way, making a sartorial point to their elders who clucked their tongues at the impertinence of unisex styles.

My father once warned me not to say ``Forever.'' ``Forever is a long time,'' he would remark. It may well be, however, that the corset effect is gone forever. At least it is gone for the foreseeable future. And with it, we have lost much of the certainty of life. Instead of inheriting our identities, we choose them. The world in which we live arrives unprepackaged now. Whereas once it came to us in the recognizable shapes of old familiar neighborhoods and predictable relationships that claimed you for life (whether you liked it or not), the only thing we can say for sure now is that nothing much is for sure. Instead of fitting into the cozy confines of the way things necessarily are, we are left to our own devices to decide how we want to sort the world out and the way we want things to be. Even the Army advertises, ``Be all that you can be.'' We civilians want at least that much.

At its core, spirituality is the sense that things all fit together despite the momentary fear that things are falling apart. It posits connectedness where there seems to be none. The search for spirituality is the yearning for shape when old contours have eroded; for belonging when the old structures (like family) to which we belonged, have broken down all around us; for meaning in a world so fragmented that we ask again and again what it's all about. The hit song of the baby boomers growing up tells it all; ``What's it all about, Alfie?" ``It" --- life, the universe, history, destiny, everything --- must be all about something, we insist. It cannot be ``a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing." Part of us wants to return to the conservative days when families could be counted on and the streets were safe for walking.

Part of us, however, knows that we can't go home again; and many of us, those who value choice anyway, have good reason not to want to. We know the new world where religious identity is elective is not all bad. The conservatives who yearn only to return to the social system of yesterday have been called loyalists. Those of us who want to make the most of the challenge that Generation Four faces can be called Seekers. We seek something to hold us together and connect us beyond ourselves, as we go about choosing the paths that will take us through the labyrinth of life. Our reality is made of parents who are old or dying, children who are young but struggling, and selves who are finding out that nothing is forever.

I return, then, to the notion of a migration. This Fourth Generation is indeed a new generation of immigrants, people from within our own community who have set out no less than Sarah and Abraham on a journey to a new internal life of the soul. I mean especially women, for whom choice has opened up as never before, but men too, who are no longer corseted in to the way things have to be, and who therefore may as well welcome the new era in which choice is crucial to our destiny. And I mean Jews by choice, people who now seek Judaism because it offers a spiritual road map to the rocky terrain of modern life where the old signposts no longer can be counted on to point our way.

No matter how old we are, we are Generation Four: the aging parents who are discovering (as one woman said to me), that aging is not for the faint hearted; the middle-aged baby-boomers who drive the cultural engine of our time; and the young adults still borrowing from parents and going to school, or casting about for careers and security, marriages and meaning. As we reach the end of the 20th century, our schools don't educate, the police can't protect, government doesn't govern, and the family neither prays together nor stays together. Is it any wonder that synagogues struggle to reinvent themselves? The Germans of Generation One built bastions of Reform religion. The eastern Europeans of Generation Two shaped habitats of Conservative ethnicity. Suburbanites of Generation Three reorganized street-corner synagogues to educate their children. And we, the Seekers of Generation Four, need to make synagogues into spiritual places that offer a taste of ultimate meaning.

Doing that successfully is our mandate. Synagogue 2000 will chart with you the road to the synagogue of the next century, a place where members matter, where compassion

counts, where learning runs deep, and ritual rings true --- a place where the presence of God is patent among us.