One of the lessons we have derived from the events of our time is that we cannot dwell at ease under the sun of our civilization, that man is the least harmless of all beings. We feel how every minute in our civilization is packed with tension like the interlude between lightning and thunder. Man has not advanced very far from the coast of chaos. It took only one storm to throw him back into the sinister. If culture is to survive, it is in need of defenses all along the shore. A frantic call to chaos shrieks in our blood. Many of us are too susceptible to it to ignore it forever. Where is the power that could offset the effect of that alluring call? How are we going to keep the demonic forces under control?

This is the decision which we have to make: whether our life is to be a pursuit of pleasure or an engagement for service. The world cannot remain a vacuum. Unless we make it an altar to God, it is invaded by demons. This is no time for neutrality. We Jews cannot remain aloof or indifferent. We, too, are either ministers of the sacred or slaves of evil. The only safeguard against constant danger is constant vigilance, constant guidance. Such guidance is given to him who lives in the reality of Israel. It is a system in which human relations rest upon two basic ideas: the idea of human rights and the idea of human obligations. In the present crisis we have learned that consciousness of our rights fades away when our sense of obligation subsides; that our duties become chains when we surrender that to which we have a just claim. There is a boundless realm of living that, if it is not to be stultified, cannot be placed under the control of either ethics or jurisprudence. How to become a master in that realm, not to curb but to shape, is a supreme challenge to intelligence.

Living cannot be treated piecemeal; it must be treated as a whole. Living is circulation; the elements of spirit absorbed by it are digested and burned. Injecting good manners or rules of conduct will not solve the problem. Life is in need of an all-embracing significant form, which should have bearing directly or indirectly on every aspect of it. Weak men rebel at such an idea, denouncing it as tyranny. But the thoughtful will not be intimidated by seeming inconvenience.
Judaism has tried to place human living in a general system of significance, to integrate our scattered actions into a whole. Through a system of rituals, observances, benedictions, man is to eliminate the chance, to drive out the nonsense from his life.

It is the small in which the great becomes real. It is the weekday in which the Sabbath is reflected.

The Torah has not imposed upon Israel a tyranny of the spirit. It does not violate human nature. On the contrary, the road to the sacred leads through the secular. The spiritual rests upon the carnal, like "the Spirit that hovers over the face of the water." Jewish living means living according to a system of checks and balances. We are not asked anything that cannot be responded to. We are not told: Love thy enemy, but; Do not hate him, and positively: "If thou meet thine enemy's ox or his ass going astray, thou shalt surely bring it back to him again" (Exodus 23:4).

Although there is no celebration of our animal nature, recognition of its right and role is never missing. Judaism does not despise the carnal, teaching, on the contrary: "Hide not yourself from your own flesh."

Our Fathers knew how to care for the most distant in the most immediate. They knew that the passing is a reflection of the lasting, that tables in our humble homes may become consecrated altars, that a single deed of an individual man may decide the fate of all mankind. They disliked the rough, the coarse, the haphazard, and tried to lend a metaphysical dignity to their deeds. Not only the extraordinary days, not only the Sabbath, even their weekdays had a form. Everything was keyed to a certain style. Every detail of life had its own physiognomy, its individual stamp.

One can serve God with the body, even with one's passions; one must only be able to distinguish between the dross and the gold. This world acquires flavor only when a little of the other world is mingled with it. Without nobility of the spirit, the flesh is full of darkness.

Why should Jews observe the particular forms of living prescribed by Torah and tradition? To those who search for the original reasons, lost and forgotten in the routine of ages, the commandments become significant when explained and prove to be related to a rational purpose, to something known. Others leave all explanations behind, never stumbling where understanding fails. To them the commandments are precious, because they are related to the unknown.

Indeed, any reason we may advance for submitting to a commandment merely points to one of its aspects, omitting more than describing. To say that the precepts have meaning is less accurate than to say that they are sources of emergent meaning.

Justifying the commandments by the aid they render to diet, hygiene, or the enjoyment of beauty, we catch only a glimpse of a light's reflections. Given out as unrefracted rays are unique
values, not obtained from other sources. The *mitzvot* are full of hidden brilliance of the holy. What is out of sight is suddenly blazing in our thoughts.

To outsiders the *mitzvot* may appear like hieroglyphic signs obscure, absurd, chains of lifeless legalism. To those who do not strive to share in the unexampled and surpassing, observance may become dreary, irksome routine, While to those who want to tie their lives to the lasting, the *mitzvot* are an art, pleasing, expressive, full of condensed significance. "Thy statutes have been my songs," said the psalmist. (119:54). No particular reasons can describe the exclusive flavor of the *mitzvot*. What is wretched and in appalling need becomes gentle and enchanting as if we own a bit of the Beyond.

Judaism is both an assurance and an urge. It is the assurance that man can realize the good in his life, that man's relation to the transcendent can be both immediate and constant. It tells us that righteousness can be achieved, that the way to integrity is open. "For this charge which I am enjoining on you today is not beyond your power, nor is it out of reach ...The matter is very near you, on your mouth and in your mind, for you to observe" (Deuteronomy 30:11-14)."You have been told, O man, what is good" (Micah 6:8).

Judaism urges the Jew to become attentive to the presence of the infinite. It opens his eyes to the abundant possibilities of creating the good, to the redemptive powers inherent in the *mitzvot*.

The idea of *mitzvah* occupies the focus of the Jew's attention. An analysis of the usage of the term *mitzvah* in both Hebrew and Yiddish and the phrases in which it occurs would disclose a universality and complexity of meaning. To the mind of the Jew the idea of *mitzvah* bears more reality than the idea of *averah*, The term *mitzvah* is one of the most frequently used terms in his vocabulary, much more indeed than the idea of *averah*. Stronger than the belief in original sin is our belief in original innocence. In Christian languages the relation of frequency and importance of the two terms is just the reverse. In fact, there seems to be no precise equivalent for *mitzvah* in Western languages. Moreover, there the term "sin" assumed the connotation of something substantial, a meaning that is alien to the term *averah*, which often meant expending to no purpose.

Out of sheer punctiliousness in observing the Law, one may come to be oblivious of the living Presence. What is the objective of observance if not to be sensitive to the spirit, to the spirit in oneself and in all things? Man is no mere reflection of the Above; he is a source of light. Divesting himself of the husks, his inner splendor may illuminate the world. God has instilled in him something of Himself, hence the momentous importance of what he does with his life.

Most vividly the Jews feel that the world is not redeemed, that the present order of things is appalling. There is no anxiety in Judaism about personal salvation. What matters is universal salvation. The task is important, not who does it. If there should be a situation in which either you or I could do a *mitzvah*, I should let you do it. If there should be a situation in which either you or I should be compelled to do an *averah*, I should do it myself.
When the maggid of Meserich heard a voice from the beyond saying that because he had dared to challenge a heavenly decision he was deprived of his share in the future life, he was overjoyed, because from now on he would be certain to serve "for the sake of heaven." "Better is one hour of return and good deeds in this world than the whole life in the world to come."

Israel was not only the hearer of the voice, Israel became the voice. A unique relation with the divine was inaugurated. Instead of a religious experience in which there is separation between the perceiving man and the perceived Supreme Being, between the subject and the object, the divine—human integration was discovered. The pious Jew knew that in doing mitzvot he was like God. He felt that his faith was God. For what is faith if not the seed of the divine sown in our souls? A seed which must mature in order to yield. The Jew realized that his giving was obtaining, his prayer—inspiration, his demand—a grant; his talking to God was God talking to Himself.

Judaism is averse to generalities. Its tendency is to make ideas convertible into reality, to interpret metaphysical insights as patterns for action, to endow the most remote principles with bearing upon our everyday conduct. In its tradition the vague became definite, the abstract concrete, the absolute historic.

What are the events that endow us with awareness of God? We do not gain that awareness by the mind's assault upon the riddles of the universe, or in the mind's surrender and waiting for guidance. The Jewish form of religious experience is always in acts, in carrying out a command, in our instilling a spiritual quality into the things we are doing.

There are those who attempt to grasp God by speculation alone. We Jews have a unique way of religious experience, Israel's reply to Moses—"We will do and we will hear"—was interpreted to mean: In doing we perceive. By enacting the spiritual on the stage of life, we perceive our kinship with the divine. Our acts, then, are waves that flow toward the shore of God. In the Jewish mind the action sings and regularity of fulfillment is the rhythm by which we utter our tunes. Our dogmas are allusions, intimations; our creed is an allegory, yet our actions are definitions.

We do not imitate; we respond. To our souls the fulfillment of a mitzvah is a way of entering into fellowship with the ultimate will. In giving ourselves to the goal we feel how He is a partner to our acts. Jewish Law is a sacred prosody, for the divine sings in our deeds, the divine is disclosed in our deeds. Our effort is but the counterpoint to the music of His will. Judaism is living shared with God.

Resorting to the divine invested in us, we do not have to bewail the fact of His shore being so far away. In our sincere compliance with His commands, the distance disappears. It is not in our power to force the Beyond to become Here; but we can transport the Here into the Beyond.