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## 'Yes, a modern renaissance of Judaism is needed for it to be relevant for the new South Africa'

Professor Norman Cantor (*The Sunday Independent*, September 3 1995), has penned a fascinating argument that Jews must redefine Jewish doctrine and behaviour in terms of modern thought if Judaism is to remain a relevant mode of belief for the twenty first century. I would strongly agree with his central thesis that if Jews wish to keep Judaism relevant, we must broaden the scope of Jewish thought. And I would argue that what is true in Cantor's analysis of American Judaism is also true for South African Judaism.

South African Judaism has long suffered from the exact malaise described by Cantor – an archaic theology reflected by a sterile and outmoded liturgy, fossilised practices and tragically little original religious thought. Conformity is the standard – conformity in both thought and behaviour. This push to conformity saps the creative strength out of our religion. It prevents us from exploiting our spiritual-

ity, and thus closes off many avenues of religious expression. This is a tragedy.

Rather we South African Jews need to grapple with the real social, economic and political issues facing this country, and then to build a meaningful spiritual response to the South African reality. We are privileged to live in an extraordinary time, one in which we have lived to see a peaceful transition to a democratically elected government. We have lived to see the dismantling of the racist apartheid system and the beginnings of the implementation of the Reconstruction and Development Programme.

The new South Africa is committed to a non-racist, non-sexist society. We Jews must not just accept the new multi-racial South Africa. We must embrace it. And we must embrace it not only as Jews, but through our Judaism. Our Judaism has many wonderful messages on the equality of all, and we must convey the teachings of Judaism on racial equality to all

South Africans.

The new South Africa is committed to non-sexism. Judaism cannot afford to ignore the tremendous social changes which have affected our attitudes towards male-female relations. Feminism has altered the way that we perceive the status of women, and if religion is to remain vital, it too must recognise and foster these changes. But beyond these specific examples, I strongly support Cantor's view that our tradition should interact with modern culture. Perhaps the most beautiful aspect of modern religion is watching how ancient traditions are adapted and adjusted to meet the spiritual needs of people today. That is what makes religion such a personal experience. If we just mimic what our ancestors found meaningful 500, 1 000 or 2 000 years ago, then we are antiquarians rather than seekers after religious meaning.

The last two hundred years have posed many challenges for religion. It

began with Copernicus and Galileo discovering that the earth was not the centre of the universe, continued with Darwin's teaching that man and woman evolved through the process of evolution over the course of millions of years, and went on with Freud, who argued against the belief that our human brains were qualitatively different from other animals. Each new system of thought posed new questions and then tried to prove specific answers.

This too was the process followed with modern biblical studies. The evidence that was assembled pointed to the conclusion that the five books of Moses had been composed by combining at least four different source documents into one document. The document associated with the divine name Jehovah was called J. The document that was identified as referring to the deity as God – Elohim – was called E. The third, and largest document, which included most of the legal sections and concentrated on matters to do with

priests, was called P. And the source based primarily in Deuteronomy was called D. This new view of the bible has tremendous ratification for modern religion. Progressive Judaic scholars have adapted the modern method of studying Judaism because it is the most powerful method of getting at the truth. Changing views on scholarship are only one aspect of how modernity has influenced religion. Change has been and must continue to be a fundamental reality in Jewish thought.

Modern philosophers – writing over the course of the last two centuries – have attempted to do for modern Judaism what the early rabbis of the Mishnaic and Talmudic period did for Rabbinic Judaism in the century after the destruction of the second temple – they restated timeless truths in terms that the Jewish people could identify and live with, in a new age.

The Jewish Renewal Rabbi Gershon

Winkler writes that Judaism is not about ways of how to be Jewish, but about Jewish ways of how to be. The covenant between God and humans is, according to Winkler, not a one-way street. Rather, it should be an ongoing interaction in which heart, intention and effort are at the core. But much of organised religion emphasises a rigid formality rather than a psychologically healthy covenanting. The result has been that much of our religious experience has been dysfunctional and did not contribute to human growth. This produced the immobilising syndrome of guilt rather than encouraging opportunities for fulfilment, self-transformation and sensitivity attunement.

We need to re-examine the texts of our tradition not only to search for descriptions of what was, but also to find visions of what might yet be. We need to remember that the classical rabbinic tradition teaches that God too also studies and interprets the Torah and therefore that we

should not feel timid in facing the daunting task of reinterpreting our religion for today's new South Africa.

For South African Judaism to thrive we need to take a really hard look at our beliefs and practices with an eye on our commitment to personal freedom. We need to encourage diverse religious expression in response to an understanding of the complexities of our times. We need to accept that religiosity is a process, not a fossilised, codified monolith. We need to allow for interpretation, while rejecting rigid and lifeless legality.

If we Jews can achieve even some of these goals, I believe that the new vitality of the Jewish religion in this country can begin to have a strong positive influence on the entire South African society. By balancing freedom with constraint, originality with tradition, and universalism with particularism, we Jews can make a unique contribution to the new South Africa.