


**CULT
ENCOUNTERS**

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"I was drifting, drifting. And then I met him. He knew exactly who he was, and, more important, he knew exactly who I was, what my purpose was, what I could be. He gave me direction; he cared about me. And the drifting stopped."

Call him Alan K. We don't know very much about him, and what we do know does not particularly distinguish him from the young man next door, the one who has it all together. But Alan joined the Hare Krishnas last week. His parents are devastated—and embarrassed—his friends are perplexed, his rabbi and teachers bewildered.

How many Alans are there? Some students of the matter have suggested that as many as 40 percent of all cult members in the United States are Jewish. A more reasonable estimate is offered by Rabbi Maurice Davis, who has deprogrammed over a hundred cult members. He believes that some 12 percent of cult members are Jewish, a figure close to Harvey Cox's estimate that 15 percent of all Hare Krishnas are Jewish. But there is little consolation in the lower figures: Egon Mayer, a Brooklyn College sociologist, has traced and documented the emergence of some 1300 new religious cults in America since 1965. Accordingly, we seem to be talking about a phenomenon which has attracted tens of thousands of young Jews.

Tens of thousands, and twice that many grieving parents. Tens of

thousands, and a community only now beginning to view the matter not merely as a personal tragedy but as a communal threat.

What is the melody these pious pipers play? And what kinds of ears are required to be attracted by it? And how, for openers, shall we define what we mean by "cult"?

Many people imagine cults as inherently violent, or orgiastic, or fraudulent. Manson and Moon have dominated the headlines, and there is a widespread tendency to suppose that all the others share the bizarre qualities of these. Many others simply lump all unfamiliar religious groups together under the heading "cult," mixing Eastern religions with self-awareness groups and Yoga institutes.

Most authorities on the subject emphasize the dogmatic nature of cults and the dependency they create around a single authoritarian figure who claims Divine power or unique access to the Truth. (It was this definition which, presumably, led Rabbi Arthur Lelyveld to assert, two years ago, that the Lubavitch Chassidim should be considered a cult.) It is almost impossible to generalize about cult leaders, be they called Gurus, Swamis, Messiahs, Reverends, or even Rebbes. How many of them are conscious exploiters of their followers' weaknesses, and how many actually believe their own claims? Obviously, cult leaders are not generally available for research studies, and we know very little about them. What we do know is that their norm is to insist on total obedience to their absolute leadership. As a working definition, the element of authoritarianism is probably the best distinction between cults and other forms of religious expression. "Any group which equates doubt with guilt is a cult," asserts Rabbi Zalman Schacter, Professor of Jewish Mysticism at Temple University. But the authoritarian nature of cults is so out of step with American notions of freedom and democracy, and with Jewish emphasis on questioning, that their attraction to Jews seems

doubly puzzling. In addition to the theological rebellion, cult membership also implies a rejection of deeply rooted general values.

The authoritarianism which alienates and puzzles the observer is quite likely the very quality that attracts the adherent. As many students of the subject have noted, the consequences of the peculiar permissiveness which characterized child-rearing in America in the 1950's and 1960's were bound to show up somewhere. The growth of cults may well be seen as a response to the absence of discipline and authority in other social institutions—most notably, the family. As Alan K. puts it,

"I didn't really know what I was doing with myself. I couldn't look to my parents or rabbi for advice; they just gave me clichés about responsibility. I did some reading, went to some lectures, but nothing helped. And then one day a friend of mine dragged me along and I met R. (Alan's guru). He seemed to know exactly what I was looking for. He was so sure of himself, and so sure of what was right for me. I felt like a new person."

It sounds, to be sure, like your average adolescent identity crisis. And maybe that is all it is. But provide a guru to intervene in such crisis, provide a master who fills a perceived vacuum, and you have a potent mix. Nor are there many parents who can any longer smugly sit back and say, "Not my child." Too many families have been touched, too many "normal" youngsters affected, to permit such certainty.

Psychologists still debate the proper proportions of structure and freedom, of discipline and permissiveness necessary in constructive parenting. And it is, of course, entirely possible that "proper" means something different for each person. But there is little disagreement that for a significant number of youngsters, there has been a debilitating absence of authority in their lives. Many of the old sym-

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bols have been tarnished, the old values debased. For at least some young people, it is a major relief to discover an environment which offers answers rather than questions, and which does so in a context that professes to be constructive. As Schacter observes, "Jewish kids need a place where they can run away to. In their adolescence they would like to live a life that gets them up to a spartan regime, which gives them the highest spiritual model of how to live, a chance to call people brother and sister, share in the chores, and have time for prayer."

That may not sound like very many Jewish kids most of us know, but the recurrent surprise is that the cults attract so many young people who do not appear to be distressed, confused, in trouble. The desire to escape from freedom is not limited to the obviously disturbed. We may, in short, be witness to the acting out of a social malaise rather than of a personal neurosis.

Cults offer direction; they offer immediacy as well, as a substitute and antidote for the abstract intellectual concepts of Judaism. Rabbi Burt Jacobson, who works with the Aquarian Minyan in Berkeley, California claims that "Jews are embarrassed to talk about God." But in the cults, God is approached ecstatically. As Alan puts it, "In the synagogue, God is just a word. Now God and peace are not somewhere out there; they are part of my everyday inner space."

"Inner space" suggests a preoccupation with self which is very much a part of what the cults have to offer. According to Rabbi Jacobson, "the energies of the Jewish community are typically turned outward—towards Israel, issues of survival, social services. There's a reticence within the Jewish community to deal with issues of personal spiritual growth." The cults, on the other hand, provide elaborately detailed guidelines for personal behavior, covering habits of eating, breathing, praying, meditating. An outsider may well ques-

tion how much growth there can be in a setting which involves the total abdication of self, but from the perspective of the convert, the cult cares about the details of his life in a way which his synagogue did not.

But the real attraction of the cults is their emphasis on community. Novelist Kurt Vonnegut once remarked that a clever presidential candidate could easily win election by adopting as his campaign slogan, "Lonesome No More." The craving for human companionship is a dominant preoccupation for large numbers of Americans, one most keenly felt during adolescence and young adulthood. In fact, the evidence suggests that cults are especially attractive to young people away from home for the first time. Some cults instruct their members to approach members of the opposite sex and to emphasize the warmth and togetherness of their group. For the bewildered and the lonely, the cult may seem substantially more attractive than a singles' bar or a dorm social. In the cult, acceptance is guaranteed.

The need for that acceptance, evidently, is most strongly felt among the children of relatively well-educated, affluent, and upwardly mobile families—exactly the group among which Jews are so disproportionately to be found. Further, the unravelling of the Jewish family seems to have happened almost overnight, in a kind of frenzied effort to "catch up" to the rest of society, creating a sudden destabilization and the loss of community. And so, in still another installment of the "Jews are like everybody else only more so" pattern, Jewish youngsters find haven in exotic religious groups. "You Jews must be a very spiritual people," a swami once told Rabbi Schacter, "because Subud, Bahai, Vedanta Society, I Am, Theosophical Society . . . they're all full of Jews."

Nor, in seeking to understand why so many Jewish youngsters have been attracted to alien cults, can we dismiss the example set by

thousands of adult Jews, an example to which Rabbi Harold Schulweis has called eloquent attention:

"We enjoy picking on the little kids and talking about 'Jews for Jesus' and other cults which are outside the established Jewish community. But I know from my own community that it is adults who are going to Synanon, to Esalen, to est, TM, Scientology, all of which are analogues of where their children are going."



"We weren't aware of anything until he made his decision and moved into the New York Temple in Brooklyn," relates Mrs. Polly Perlmutter. Her son, Daniel, joined the International Society of Krishna Consciousness in 1972. "He told me, 'I have made a decision about what I'm going to do with my life.' And he was all of 19! That was the shock. It wasn't really anger, it was more bewildering. . . . 'What a cop-out,' my husband said."

Anger, resentment, bewilderment, shock, fear; all common reactions among parents of children who have joined cults.

But the Perlmutter's are exceptions. They have come to accept their son's involvement as a Hare Krishna. "You just don't say to your son, 'come home or else I'll kill you,'" says Mrs. Perlmutter. "There was only one thing for us to do and that was to learn, to find out what this strange thing we know nothing about really is."

As straightforward as the Perlmutter's approach may appear, few parents of cult members have been willing to adopt it. Most parents know about the cults only from sensationalized press accounts, and

never bother to look further. Before they have reason to, they lack incentive; after they have reason to, they are too upset. When parents of one long-time Krishna convert approached Mrs. Perlmutter for support, she was surprised to learn of their ignorance. "In ten years they had learned nothing, had not even tried to understand. Apparently that's typical. They've spent ten years resenting."

As a result of parental ignorance there is great confusion about where to turn when help is needed. Should one turn to friends and family? But what of the embarrassment? To a rabbi? But what can he know? To a psychologist? But how will he reach the child? Some parents turn to men like Rabbi Davis who see the cults as brainwashing agencies and who claim to deprogram cult members. As melodramatic as some of the more publicized efforts at deprogramming have been, the approach offers some comfort to parents, who can think that their innocent children have been ensnared by demonic forces. Other students of the matter, however, suggest a very high rate of mental instability among cult members. Hamden, Connecticut Rabbi Alvin Berkun, for example, believes that some 60 percent of those who join cults have a record of such instability. This assertion distresses parents, and raises a major challenge to social agencies: are we to assume that tens of thousands of young Jews are in urgent need of psychiatric attention?

Many people who think about these things see the matter rather more prosaically. The world is unsettled and unsettling; cults are a tempting and increasingly acceptable way of opting out of the struggles that accompany growing up in such a world. In this view, it is not that disturbed young people search out the cults. Instead, the cults energetically cast a very broad net, and in that net they catch large numbers of youngsters whose confusions are perfectly normal—as well, of course, as a proportion of those who do need clinical help.



The confusion of Jewish parents is mirrored in the Jewish community at large, which has only recently begun to respond in systematic fashion to the threat of the cult. Two recent responses are especially worthy of note.

In January 1978, the Jewish Community Relations Council of Greater Philadelphia released a 70 page report of its Special Committee on Exotic Cults. While criticizing some cults for anti-Semitism and abuse of power, the report goes on to cite growing secularism as a major factor in the flight of Jewish youth from traditional institutions. Jewish identity, it says, has lost the crucial balance which melds ethnicity and spirituality together. "Ethnicity alone," says the report, "has become the sum total of Jewish identity for a large part of the American Jewish community." And our concern with bigness—in synagogues, fund raising drives and service programs—has eroded "the warmth, intimacy and supportive-ness of the small group."

The Philadelphia report, which is the first major document to address itself to Eastern as well as Western cults, singles out the college arena as a crucial one in the struggle for Jewish youth identity. Sadly, the well-researched study shows most campus programs to be understaffed and underfunded. At the University of Pennsylvania, only two full time staff workers serve a student pool of between five and six thousand Jews. (At the same school the Protestant ministries provide a full time staff of twelve.)

The needs are clear, says the report: more campus workers and better facilities for the hundreds of thousands of Jews on the cam-

pus; store-fronts, drop-in centers and coffeehouses to provide an open door to other young adults; specially funded programs to expose greater numbers of Jewish youth to charismatic Jewish leaders in both formal and informal settings.

The report also recommends expanding high school youth movement programs, aid to summer camps, trips to Israel and a variety of programs which create close living situations.

Jewish retreat centers are another major priority of the report. "These centers are long overdue," declares Rabbi Steven Shaw, Programming Director of the National Jewish Conference Board. "Catholic and Protestant groups have long seen the positive benefits that such centers can provide for intensive communal and spiritual experience. But no one has yet been willing to fund retreat centers specifically for Jews."

Rabbi James Rudin of the American Jewish Committee sees the need for sizable Jewish communities to sponsor hostels for young Jews where food, counseling, prayer, and study would all be incorporated under a single roof with sleeping accommodations.

Jewish education, long considered the panacea for a variety of Jewish ills, is noticeably absent in the Philadelphia report, except as a component of larger endeavors like retreat centers and hostels. The emphasis on new living situations rather than on new learning programs is revealing.

And in New Haven, Connecticut in May of 1978, the Central Conference of Reform Rabbis met to discuss the cults. Doctors, lawyers, and psychologists were invited to discuss deprogramming, proselytizing and other cult-related issues. Members of the Alliance for the Preservation of Religious Liberty picketed the conference, claiming that mental health professionals should not pass judgment on religious movements. Some conference delegates advocated mini-courses in public and religious schools to warn kids of the dangers

of missionary groups, others stressed the need for a greater emphasis on Jewish education. What is remarkable is not so much the content of this conference as the fact that it was held at all. The cults have come of age; they are now perceived as an affliction which threatens significant numbers of young Jews.

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Some observers, in seeking an antidote for the pernicious lure of the cult, have pointed to the success that the Lubavitch movement has enjoyed in its efforts at reaching campus youngsters. Pursuing its goals with a missionary zeal that rivals the most energetic cults, Lubavitch offers many of the same satisfactions the cults do.

(Lubavitch members have, on occasion, entered the temples of Swami Satchidananda and Hare Krishna in order to win Jews back to their tradition.) Indeed, the superficial similarity between Lubavitch and the cults—authoritarian leadership, elaborate rules to guide personal behavior, submergence of self to community, repression of sexual energy—have prompted critics of the “Lubavitch strategy” to suggest that one ought not fight fire with fire. “Freaking out” on Chassidut may be less threatening than wandering about downtown streets with shaven head and saffron robe, but it’s still freaking out, an abdication of the self rather than an indication of personal growth.

That argument will not soon be settled, and, whatever the view one takes, it is obvious that the Jewish community cannot afford to rely on any one answer to satisfy the diverse quests of the wayward young. Lubavitch will appeal to some; for others, especially those

most attracted by relatively non-dogmatic groups, such as Integral Yoga, Sufi and Meher Baba, other answers are required. These groups emphasize yoga and tolerant devotionalism; Zen and Vedanta are still more intellectually and self-awareness oriented. And the best bridge the Jewish community has to these kinds of groups is Rabbi Zalman Meshullam Schacter, former diamond cutter, Lubavitch rabbi, LSD tripper, Sufi Sheikh, Professor at Temple University.

An unabashed proponent of Yiddishkeit, Schacter has been instrumental in popularizing the spirit and teachings of eccentric Chassidic masters like Reb Nachman of Bratzlav. He has introduced labs into the courses he teaches at Temple University because he believes that chanting Chassidic melodies can help students understand the rise of Chassidim in Europe. He is the first rabbi with a Chassidic and traditional Kabbalistic background to unabashedly introduce modes of worship usually considered Eastern into Jewish settings. “Zalman’s got plenty of shticks,” comments one rabbi, “but he’s the most creative force we’ve got. We have to appreciate him for his creativity and try to ignore the rest.”

Schacter brings his eclectic lifestyle to weekend retreats and experiential learning sessions all across America. His approach is more often practical than philosophical, intuitive rather than scientific. His retreats highlight meditation, chanting, dance, free movement, breathing exercises and other kinds of bodywork. The flute and guitar help create an atmosphere he sees as conducive to communal and spiritual endeavors.

This greying guru’s mild mannered speech and warm eyes give no hint of his stormy past or his controversial present. Somewhere along the way, whether because of drug-induced or other experiences, Schacter became convinced that the Jewish way was not the only way. In his book *Fragments of a Future Scroll*, he describes what he

calls “Humanistic Kabbalism,” an approach to the spiritual goodies of Kabbalah which often raids the picnic baskets of other traditions as well. “No one has anything but approximations on how to serve God,” he claims. “If the Orthodox (Jews) had it all together they would be happier and holier.”

Schacter is pained by the many Jews who have turned to cults and other religious groups. He feels that most Jewish institutions have stagnated because of their lack of responsiveness to the more mystical and obscure elements in the tradition—elements which he finds most useful in attracting disaffected Jewish youth from a wide spectrum of backgrounds, from the totally non-religious to those with a yeshiva education. Except for an occasional Yiddish phrase, his appeal is noticeably non-ethnic. At a recent retreat in the hills of Eastern Pennsylvania there was more interest in the strictly vegetarian meals than in issues of survival or Zionism.

Rabbi Jacobson echoes the shortcomings which Schacter decries. “Synagogues have been basically lacking in reaching out to young or middle-aged individuals with a strong spiritual path to personal development,” says Jacobson. Direct experience and group support are top priorities in Schacter’s attempt to domesticate so-called “peak experiences” and bring a more transcendent hue to the humdrum colors of everyday life.

A highly controversial figure in his own right, Schacter laments the cynicism which he claims undercuts the controversial deprogramming efforts of Jewish and other anti-cult leaders. “A lot of the cults are bad because they deprive human beings of growth and make them slaves of a kind of fear. But I don’t like the cynicism that deprogramming creates about the whole human enterprise,” he says. “There should be some respect for what a soul has to work out with God on this planet.”

With the establishment of a Rabbinic Seminary Without Walls and the formation of B’nai Or, an

organization devoted to "God, Consciousness, Torah and the harmonious development of the whole Jewish person," a new phase begins in this roving teacher's life. After having been a prime force behind the establishment of West Coast counter culture groups like the Aquarian Minyan, Schacter will now try to create a network for all Jewish alternative groups under the B'nai Or umbrella, providing educational and counseling services along the way. Considering that he operates outside the Jewish institutional framework, it is a bold endeavor. But his combination of a cultivated imagination and a down-to-earth, childlike exuberance may well sow the seeds for a viable Jewish alternative to cults. The result may not look like anything we know now, but neither is it likely to be as alien in either substance or structure as the cults are. There will surely be critics who see Schacter as a wolf in sheep's clothing, subverting Jewish youth from within. More likely, he offers a resting place for people who need time to find their own way, a place far more likely to sustain their Jewishness than is offered by the cults.

V

Rabbi Schacter's emphasis on the practical and experiential is one symptom of a search that engages many Jews, as the success of how-to-do-it books like the *Jewish Catalogue* clearly show. The increase of interest in chavurot and other communal endeavors also demonstrates a growing desire to taste firsthand the fruits of Jewish tradition, however prepared or processed.

But if Rabbi Shaw is correct, even groups like Schacter's will be hard put to influence large numbers of Jewish youth. Many Jewish alternative groups, he points out,

assume a certain socialization into Jewish ways of praying, sharing Shabbat, appreciating Israel, and feeling confident about one's own identity as a Jew. Alternative groups can draw on these feelings and experiences but often cannot create them *ex nihilo* when Jewish camp, youth movement, or Israel experiences are lacking. And Shaw sees no major liturgical communities on the horizon which might form the basis for a spontaneous synthesis of mystical and consciousness raising currents with traditional Jewish expression.

Jewish leadership is also handicapped by the lack of personnel trained to deal with alternative lifestyles. "A lot of that has to do with the training of rabbis," says Rabbi Jacobson. "The kind of education that Reform and Conservative rabbis receive has nothing to do with individual spiritual growth—it's professional training on how to study the sources and perform a priestly function in the community, to carry out administrative as well as ritual functions."

And in professional training in the field of Jewish communal service a similar outward emphasis is prevalent. Fund raising and social service projects override any concern with the development of agency programs to encourage experimentation with spiritual as well as ethnic identification. Here, too, a socialization process weeds out those Jews with an interest in individual spiritual growth until only those with more pedestrian concerns remain.

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No, we do not know very much about cults, nor about those who join them. We do, however, know that those who remain in the conventional community, who do not

seek and who are uncomfortable with the alternative lifestyles that have now become so popular, are not necessarily satisfied with the opportunities the community offers for spiritual growth. And, amidst the plans for coffee houses and social workers, amidst the conferences on deprogramming and on counter-propaganda, perhaps there is room for increased attention to creating a community that will more obviously and more completely satisfy the yearnings of its members. Those members are the parents of the young people for whom cults are now an option, and what those young people learn from their parents may have something to do with whether they choose to exercise that option, or, rejecting it, choose to find answers within the community. As Harold Schulweis says,

"How shall we answer the Jew who asks, 'You tell me where in this great Jewish community there is compassion and care for me individually. You tell me where there is an opportunity for me. Who cares about me in the synagogue, in the federation?"

Kierkegaard said he once went into a store that had a sign on the outside that read 'Suits Pressed Here.' And he said, 'I'd like you to press my suit.' The storekeeper said, 'You're making a great mistake. We don't press suits here—we make signs.'

It seems to me that we have got to understand that you can't talk about peoplehood or about God or about Torah unless you allow people to experience intimately in a non-threatening and supportive community their presence, their spontaneity, their freedom, unless they can experience peoplehood and divinity and goodness and study. It is time to stop making signs. It is time to create communities, beginning, of course, with ourselves." ★