



## Reassessing Jewish roots

Ages, or the destruction of Solomon's Temple. To the Western mind, rooted as it is in Christian pessimism, in the belief that man as a tainted or imperfect creature must fail, this can only sound tragic, in the sense that all human endeavor is tragic and doomed to failure.

That such a view is alien to the Jewish mind should not surprise anyone, although I expect that it will. The 400-plus "Jewish" students of Grinnell come, for the most part, from successful, assimilated families where social success was almost the dominant ethical value. It is precisely such Jews who, having rightly rejected the "religion" of their parents (which was in many cases the worst kind of mixture of Christian values and Jewish ritual), have gone on to declare religion itself outdated, useless, superstitious, absurd, irrelevant, or any number of other things, without any conception of the underlying realities of Judaism. (Many will quarrel with me on this point, but, having lived through them myself, I remain unconvinced that nine years of weekly Reform religious school and a perfunctory bar mitzvah give anything like insight into the essence of Judaism.)

So, an impasse results. On the one side is the entire body of Jewish wisdom; deep, rich, mystical, and often hidden. On the other stand the Jews of Grinnell and millions like

them—either completely apathetic or vaguely intrigued, but without any idea of how to explore those riches. And although I may try to make you think otherwise at times, I can only count myself among those mired in ignorance.

It was probably last year, when I was on the 'Grinnell in Israel' program, that I became aware of the extent of my continuing ignorance of the religion I rejected in seventh grade. So now, for instance, I go to Rabbi Kasowitz's class on Jewish mysticism, not because I believe in it or see in it the means for Jewish Renewal, but because I am searching for clues. Clearly, Rabbi Kasowitz represents more of the past than the future; he is even clearly pleased by the fact that the past lives through him. But if Judaism is to survive now, as it has for 3000 years, by evolving rapidly to meet the demands of the times, it can not do so from a position of nearly total ignorance of its roots.

It is for this reason that I invite the silent "Jews" of Grinnell to join me in attempting to remove the quotation marks from our name. This evening at 7:30 in Loose Lounge there will be an Oneg Shabbat after which we shall discuss the Talmud. Rabbi Kasowitz's class on Chassidism resumes Sunday at 3:30 p.m. in Steiner 27. If these terms are alien to you, that's all the more reason to come. The "faith of your fathers" might just be more than the religion of your parents.

One of the more frequently bandied-about statistics you hear at this school is that "Grinnell College is more than one third Jewish." Even if we ignore the grammatical nonsense of this claim and examine what people really mean—that more than a third of Grinnell's students are Jewish—this statement, like so many improperly used statistics, can be grossly misleading.

As with most statistical illusions, the deception is in the definition. Of course, we all know what kind of a Jew comes to live in Grinnell, Iowa for four years: one who is not terribly bothered by the absence of a synagogue and the virtual absence of Jewish community life. This is only natural, and Grinnell's Jews certainly have no more (and probably much less) cause to complain of isolation than Grinnell's blacks, for example. Yet the Jews of Grinnell are in serious trouble, though isolation is not the cause.

Isolation, in fact, has never deterred Jews before. Rather, one finds Jewish history bursting with examples of tiny but dedicated isolated communities flourishing in remote areas of the world. As long as the underlying commitment and respect for tradition remained, the Jews were indestructible, even at the hands of Hitler, Torquemada, and the Roman empire.

That tradition, here in Grinnell at least, is virtually dead. Despite all the efforts of Rabbi Kasowitz or anyone else, I am deeply certain that, in its old form at least, it can never be revived.

But if that last sentence has a tragic sound to it, that can only be because the reader misconceives the nature of Judaism and Jewish culture. Certainly it is sad to see centuries of European Yiddishkeit go the ways of the Aztecs. But, given the rich literature and other treasures it has left behind, it is surely far less sad than the total loss of Chinese Judaism in the Middle

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