THE CHALLENGE OF THE CULTS

Discussion Packet

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THE CHALLENGE OF THE CULTS

Background

Prepared by Marcia Rudin & Rabbi A. James Rudin, February, 1979

The mass murders in Guyana in November, 1978 have stunned the American public and forced us to ask: "Who and what are the cults?" Since 1965 nearly 1,500 new religious movements have emerged on the American scene. And this is only an estimate, for there are many groups that are practically unknown to the general public. Almost all of these groups demand a "high intensity" commitment from their followers in return for a "quick fix" spiritual experience.

Despite Guyana, the various cults today are exhibiting new self-confidence as they increase in size and strength. Their appeal to young adults and the high percentage of Jews in the cults present the Jewish community with a serious challenge.

Although each cult is different, there are some features common to almost all of them:

• total allegiance to an all-powerful charismatic leader;
• anti-intellectualism, often combined with highly sophisticated methods of behavioral change that result in ego destruction;
• restricted or controlled physical and emotional environments with little outside contact;
• members often give over their incomes, trust funds, or savings to the cult;
• cult leaders usually demand their followers abandon their jobs, schools, and families;
• the cult determines all important life decisions, including marriage;
• followers often work for the cult in psychologically and physically demeaning jobs, sometimes without pay;
• cults usually forbid alcohol, drugs, pre-marital sex, and tobacco (but there are notable exceptions...Children of God and People's Temple);
• cults, although promising to save humanity, generally sponsor no social welfare programs of their own;

• cults discourage, even forbid, any critical analysis by their followers, thus creating a sense of utter dependence among the members;

• members face psychic harassment at best, physical threats at worst, if they seek to leave the cult;

• many cults offer their members poor diets, inadequate sleep patterns, and shabby living conditions;

• each cult asserts that it alone has the "Truth"; all other religions are "spiritually empty" while the cult is "superior" to those outside the group.

The cult generally appeals to the white, middle class, college-educated young adult (18-30), who is often a child of a successful businessperson or professional. The cults play upon a person's guilt and loneliness combined with a "totalist" approach to the world and its problems. There have been many cases of altered states of consciousness, deep-seated psychological changes, and profound behavior modifications among cult members. In return for the leader's unconditioned "love," the member yields his/her critical faculties and independent judgments. The leader alone defines truth and falsehood, sin, repentance and salvation, and sometimes even life and death.

Several of the major cults are anti-feminist (Hare Krishna and Children of God), while the Unification Church's basic text "Divine Principle" is replete with anti-Semitic teachings. Almost all of the cults are anti-democratic.

Although precise numbers are hard to obtain, it is clear that Jewish membership in many of the cults far exceeds our 3% national population average. Nor is their appeal limited solely to people under 30. Scientology especially is attracting a significant number of Jews above that age.

How can we explain the proliferation of the cults in the United States? There is, of course, no one answer or set of answers; rather, only some general observations about the current mood in America. There has been a "turning inward" among many groups and individuals; the moral passion that once powered the civil rights and the anti-Vietnam War movements has spent itself. The powerful sense of "me, me, me" has combined with a belief that every American institution from the Presidency on down is discredited. This has contributed to the "climate of the cults." In such an atmosphere, cults that make ultimate claims and demands flourish.

Some observers of the American religious scene assert the cults offer certain positive values to their members. The restrictions against drugs, pre-marital sex, alcohol, and tobacco found in many cults are often cited. The cults, it is claimed, provide alienated and confused young people with a true "spiritual experience." The observers claim cult members receive direction and purpose in their lives as well as a "sense of belonging." Finally, they declare, today's established religions were yesterday's cults. Critics, however, reject these contentions and instead stress the dangers the cults present to our society.
As Jews we are concerned for a variety of reasons. Any movement with anti-Semitic teachings is disturbing. The cults in their exclusivity and anti-democratic tactics are a threat to America's religious pluralism. Finally, there is the profoundly human trauma of family separations, of seeing even one Jew abandon his/her people by seeking affiliation in a cult.

The rise of the cults presents us with critical legal problems as well. AJC is deeply committed to the First Amendment and the concept of religious liberty. In fact, that is a vital part of our reason for being. The First Amendment, of course, makes no distinction between long-established religious groups and those of more recent vintage, no matter how bizarre they may seem to non-believers. It clearly protects the right of parents to attempt to influence the religious views of their own children. But the First Amendment also protects the right of anyone or any group to seek to make converts, provided that this endeavor is undertaken lawfully. In sum, the Constitution does not and cannot "pick and choose" as between competing religious groups.

We have been shaken by reports of alleged physical and psychic abuses practiced by some cults. Are our current laws adequate to prosecute when criminal or civil violations have taken place? Although we must guard against a wave of government repression, nonetheless, we are obligated to look at these legal questions:

• Do cults make full financial disclosures when they collect funds from the general public in airports, bus terminals, and on the streets?

• Are the cults' methods of financial solicitation legal?

• Do the cults harbor minors? Do minor members work for no pay?

• Do the cults' educational institutions fully meet accreditation standards?

• Is a member free to leave a cult?

• Are some cults more accurately characterized as business enterprises rather than religions?

• Do the various cult leaders extort money from their members?

• Do the cults obey the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization laws?

• Do the cults devote a substantial part of their activities to political propaganda or intervening in political campaigns?

There has been much discussion about "de-programming" and the term has come to mean many things. Some parents, in a sense of utter desperation and anger (and we can empathize with them), have resorted to illegal means to regain their children from the cults. Generally such actions are followed by long and intensive conversations between the cult member and a person who is highly knowledgeable about the methods and beliefs of the particular cults. Yet, kidnapping and forcible detention, for example, violate the law and cannot be condoned, notwithstanding the parents' deep feelings, any more than they could be condoned if a wayward son or daughter were to join the Communist
Party or were on the verge of entering into a marriage which the parents view as a disaster. But there are other methods, all quite legal, that can convey to the member who is willing to listen some critical information about the cult that he or she might never otherwise receive.

Are we obligated to stand idly by when our young people are seduced into entering a psychologically destructive cult? We encourage even limited communication between cult members and their families, and the Jewish community needs to develop, along with other religious groups, new and legal methods to "reclaim" our young men and women. Rabbis, teachers, and psychologists are helpful, but experience indicates that peer group rehabilitation is often the most effective, such as in-depth conversations between a cult member and a deeply committed Jew. Above all, when a cult members "comes out," he/she needs constant psychological support and counseling. Cult members, once they have been exposed to the totalism of the movement and then discover the extensive duplicity and manipulation of the cult, are sometimes drained and even shattered by the intense emotions they have experienced. As in so many other areas of human life, "tender loving care" is called for.

Finally, we must ask ourselves why some young Jews are attracted to the cults. Several possible reasons have already been mentioned, but is it simply an attempt to overcome loneliness and alienation? Perhaps it is a sign of delayed maturity or evaded responsibility. In many cases it is a spiritual quest by people who desperately seek meaning in their lives, something they apparently cannot discover within Judaism. Or is it a break with parental and community authority on the part of a young Jew, only to substitute the rejected authority with the newer, harsher one of the cult? Is the willingness to submit to strict regulation and extreme authority an indication that the cult member cannot handle the "burden of freedom," the ambiguities of life?

What can we do as members of the Jewish community? We must address ourselves to the immediate needs of our young with coffee houses, "hot lines" of spiritual counseling, and runaway hostels. We must make known the rich variety of Jewish lifestyles that are available along with more intensive Jewish education. Above all, we must not berate ourselves with excessive guilt. There have always been such extreme religious movements, especially in times of great social change and upheaval. But we have survived as a people because we feared that each Jewish generation might be the last, and thus, historically, we redoubled our efforts to guarantee Jewish continuity and identity. We face a similar challenge today.
NOTE TO THE DISCUSSION LEADER

The sections of the enclosed article, "My Mind Was Blown Away," by Rabbi A. James Rudin which are printed in script will be useful in making the introductory remarks on this discussion topic.
"MY MIND WAS BLOWN AWAY"

By A. James Rudin

"Unbelievable" "Incredible" "Unreal"

That's how most people reacted to the mass suicides and murders at the People's Temple settlement in Guyana. But what happened was real and believable; more than 900 people lost their lives there. Long-time observers of the cult scene were not surprised by the Jonestown tragedy; they were simply stunned by the large number of deaths.

In the last decade more than 2,000 new religious movements have appeared in the United States, perhaps the greatest proliferation of such groups in the nation's history. Many are led by charismatic leaders, authoritarian at best, totalitarian at worst, who often present themselves and are accepted by their followers as messianic and/or divine figures.

People seldom join cults for ideological or theological reasons. Practically all seek to overcome a sense of estrangement and loneliness. Cult leaders offer unconditional love and acceptance within caring communities. The psychic and physical price paid is constantly escalated. Drop out of work or school; leave your family and move to the community's building or settlement; allow the cult to dictate work assignments, diet, sleep and sexual habits; cede to the leader total authority to grant forgiveness and grace, define sin, repentance and salvation, and finally decide what is true and what is false. A cult member is never physically alone, intellectually in doubt, or emotionally troubled. He or she surrenders critical faculties, previous belief systems and sometimes, as in Guyana, his or her life -- all for the leader.

"I felt as if my mind was blown away, and it became filled with the group's values, standards and demands," Steve Hassen, a former member of a cult -- the Unification Church -- told AJC members at the 1977 Annual Meeting.

The AJC has long been concerned with the challenge of the cults and their attraction for a significant number of Jews, mostly between the ages of 18 and 30. In 1976 AJC published a content analysis of the basic teaching book of Sun Myung Moon's Unification Church. Prepared by the Interreligious Affairs Department, this study documented the group's blatant anti-Semitism. Among the book's assertions were these: Jews of Biblical times, the time of Jesus, and today are "faithless" and their "inner contents are corrupt." The Jewish people, as allies of Satan, are collectively responsible for the crucifixion of Jesus. They have lost God's "heritage" and are still being "punished" for many sins. When the report was released at a press conference, AJC was joined by officials of the National Council of Churches and the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of New York in a denunciation of the Unification Church as "anti-Semitic, anti-democratic and in direct conflict with the basic teachings of Christianity." And early in 1977 AJC brought together representatives of national synagogue groups, rabbinical seminaries, and...
Jewish educational leaders to discuss the findings and assess the impact of the cults. Follow up reports and interviews revealed that Jewish membership in the Unification Church, Hare Krishna, Divine Light Mission and the Church of Scientology far exceed the national Jewish population average.

Meanwhile the national office and several AJC chapters were conducting surveys which revealed that young Jews from a wide spectrum of Jewish backgrounds have entered many cults, often causing family separations and alienating them from the Jewish community. A plenary session of AJC's 1977 Annual Meeting was devoted to the cults. It was one of the first public meetings in which a former cult member described how he was recruited, his duties as a "Moonie," the Unification Church's belief system and how he finally left the group to return to college. Last year, AJC's Present Tense magazine published articles on the Unification Church and on the Hebrew Christian groups, the latter pointing out the many kinds of duplicity and manipulation they practice on Jewish youngsters.

Education and interpretation have been AJC's major objectives in its concentration on the cult phenomenon. To those ends we have gathered extensive data about the various groups, and have alerted both the Jewish and general communities to their ideologies and methods.

From AJC research these suggestions for action have emerged to stem the "exodus" of young Jews from the Jewish community: Parents, rabbis, teachers and community leaders must recognize that the problem is a spiritual and personal one for Jewish young people. Thus, religious values must be at the core of the Jewish educational system. Therefore the sense of being part of a "Hevra" or Jewish fellowship must be emphasized to young Jews. We Jews have long prided ourselves on being an extended family. Students in Jewish schools must be provided a "terrain map" of the cults, to be better prepared for the world of "newtime religion."

Because so many of our young people are part of a highly mobile society, Jewish hostels need to be established in major cities to provide not only food and lodging, but a total Jewish climate as well. Such hostels could be staffed by Jewishly committed peers, social workers, rabbis, psychologists, and others. They would provide Jewish education, theological counseling, and quite simply a place to talk about one's Jewishness.

The events involving the People's Temple in Guyana are an important challenge to an organization such as AJC. The intense psychological and physical coercion at Jonestown, the charges and counter-charges of kidnapping, the ugly court cases involving custody of children, and all the other horrors since revealed are all unacceptable to a free American society. Congressman Leo Ryan was murdered because he sought a legal and safe means to allow Temple members to leave. We too, while respecting the legal right of persons to join cults, must also help to develop guarantees of the right to leave.
"Why didn't you leave the group earlier?" a former cultist, a Jew, was asked.

"I was physically assaulted -- afraid I would be beaten or followed or harassed, or even killed," he answered.

"Killed by a community of love and acceptance?"

"Yes, killed for love."

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Discussion Guide

1. What are some of the new cults that have appeared in America?
   What are their common characteristics?
   Which ones seem to pose the most dangers to Jews and why?

2. Is there anything about the climate of American life today in general, and the Jewish community in particular, that has permitted the proliferation of the cults?
   Is it a passing fad or are they here to stay?

3. Do the cults really pose a serious challenge to the pluralistic and democratic nature of the American society? Why?

4. Why are we, as Jews, disturbed by the cults?
   Do they really pose a direct threat to Jewish continuity and survival in America?

5. What is the situation in our own communities?
   Have any of the cults been successful here?

6. Is there anyone who has had a personal encounter, or knows of a personal encounter, and wishes to share it with the group?

7. How should we react to the cults that have "opened shop" in our community? What should be our attitude toward Jews who have joined the cults?
   Should we try to reach out, not exclude them from the Jewish community?

8. What is your opinion regarding deprogramming?
   What are the ethical and legal issues it raises?
9. Do you think that the government should limit the activity of the cults? Why?

10. How can we strengthen ourselves as individuals, members of families and of the Jewish community, against the cults? Would a young Jew who is emotionally and intellectually engaged with Judaism, who had a warm, positive Jewish experience, who is Jewishly informed and committed, be likely to become involved with a new religious movement?

11. What can the Jewish community do to prevent further proliferation of the cults? What kind of Jewish experiences and institutions should we provide at home, in our congregations, and in the Jewish community?
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Bibliography


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