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**I**t seems quite natural that a descendant of Abraham and Sarah should ask himself the question: What am I doing here? What is my purpose, my task, my mission here on this earth? After all, their original dislocation was a response to their Divine assignment. Appropriate, then, that those of us who follow their path—though obviously at different turns and with different footsteps—should ponder such questions. And the answers—more precisely, the intimations, the intuitions, the insights—are more likely to lead us aright, not astray, in so far as they take account of and reflect our personal circumstances.

I was born in Chariton, a small Iowa farm town (pop. 5,000), and lived there my first eleven years. As I look back at those years, I am struck by three features of life there that I think partially marked my path and defined my task for the following decades: the omnipresence of the Iowa countryside, with its black, fertile soil, gently rolling prairies, miles of corn fields, and expansive skies; the importance of the practice of Judaism within our home, but—with only three Jewish families in Chariton—not primarily as part of a larger Jewish community; and my awareness of being different from other kids because I was Jewish, though I also had a sense of belonging and being rooted in those natural surroundings.

One discernible result is that I have developed over the decades a passion for integrating elements of nature into Jewish religious practices: special attention to New Moons and Full Moons; a sun wheel and special poetry at Sabbath services nearest Solstices and Equinoxes to mark the turning of the seasons; the conversion of our Temple Emanuel Eternal Light to solar power more than twenty years ago. Such "innovations"—more accurately, the reclaiming of the natural vitality originally found in those liturgical celebrations—have touched, excited, delighted, and moved many people to a fuller appreciation of Judaism and a deeper concern for nature. They were helped, I am convinced, by a certain personal marginality, my sense of the validity of Jewish individuality not confined to accepted community practices. And their contribution to the religious lives of many Jews and the

preservation of our planet reflects, surely, something of the purpose of my being here.

Two formative experiences during adolescence also, I believe, contributed significantly to some of my life-long religious commitments. When we moved to Des Moines, my involvement with our local synagogue and its rabbi, Monroe J. Levens, introduced me to both the classical Biblical prophets and current social issues. Amos, with his passion for economic justice and his challenging, gutsy rhetoric, was my overall favorite; Zechariah, with his vision of God's Spirit effectively replacing might and violence as the effective agency for achieving social justice, was most intriguing. Acquaintance with some deeply convinced Iowa Quakers and the American Friends Service Committee solidified my tentative commitment to the struggle for social justice by nonviolent means, and this, too, has been a significant part of my sense of religious purpose on this planet.

Throughout adolescence, I had the experience of being moved and inspired by music, by poetry, by paintings and sculpture, by philosophical writings, and by plays. Often the inspiration from an especially affecting piece of music or writing felt similar to what I received from my Jewish religious tradition, a feeling powerfully reinforced during the amazing, eyes-ears-and-spirit-opening years when I was a student at the University of Chicago. Understandable, then, that the Sabbath services I later conducted would include selections from Haim David Thoreau, Reb Meir Rilke, e. e. cummings, William Blake, Carl Sandburg, and others. How should Mozart's 200th *jahrzeit* (anniversary of his death) not be taken note of at our Shabbat service? How should Gandhi's birthday pass unnoticed? *Yi-chud* (a central Jewish value) will mean little if it does not begin with our bringing together in harmony those various elements that contribute to the life of our own spirit. This, too, the recognition of the sacred beyond the confines of any single tradition, its acknowledgment, and its inclusion in our own religious expressions, has been for me a decades-long conviction and practice that I now regard as part of my mission.

