With the Jewish community’s commitment to promoting continuity gathering momentum, those working to enhance Jewish identity have understandably not left many stones unturned. As a result, from Jewish Community Centers and summer camps to Jewish Family Service agencies, professionals in settings hitherto not necessarily engaged in this task or once considered peripheral to it, have begun to reassess their potential roles. This paper focuses on one segment of these efforts, the interface between counseling and the interest in strengthening Jewish identity. The paper reviews the mental health field’s historical disregard for religion and surveys a variety of psychoanalytically oriented approaches that consider the capacity for engagement with religion to be a critical element of health.1

Religion – An Historical Blind Spot For Clinicians

Considering that they both concern themselves with an individual’s ultimate struggle for a sense of well being, it was by no means foreordained that the mental health field should have developed a blind spot if not an attitude of disregard toward religion. For generations it was as if when mental health professionals contemplated their work and their clients’ efforts to cope with life, religion—the very practices and institutions which for millennia had served humanity in its deepest quest for meaning and well being—had suddenly ceased to exist.2

Adaptation To Life, a fascinating longitudinal study by George Vaillant (1977) based on research that began just prior to World War II, provides a compelling illustration of the blind spot in question. The
study's main hypothesis was that healthier lives would be associated with reliance on higher level coping mechanisms, although researchers apparently collected vast amounts of information on aspects of life well beyond the analysis of coping mechanisms. Participants in the study were students at Harvard University between 1939 and 1944. Through the 1970's, the course of their lives was systematically assessed through in-depth interviews. Near the end of the study, Vaillant decided to solicit a reaction from one of the participants to a profile deemed to demonstrate a particularly healthy adaptation to life.

The participant's reply included the following comments: “I have two foggy concepts that you might want to churn around in your head. One I guess you would call ‘the celebrant sense’ or that wonderful hippy word, ‘Wow!’…. I get no such sense of celebration out of your portrait…. The other component of adaptation which I think needs to be considered is in my mind classified as the big discovery of my fifties. It is called by a lot of names, depending on your religious, philosophical, or even mystical orientation. Though I call it empathy...” Wishing Vaillant well, the participant concluded his letter with the words “Onward—and blessings!” Dumbfounded, Vaillant handed the letter to a trusted research assistant who said simply, “There's not much you can say about it; it's just all there” (Vaillant 1977, pp. 357 and 358).

The “celebrant sense” can be found outside religion, but it is, of course, central to religion. Likewise, while the study did take note of “altruistic behavior,” it never bothered to explore the roots of the urge to “do good” and its link with the Judeo-Christian tradition’s cardinal injunction on the subject of empathy, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Several generations of psychoanalytically oriented researchers