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THE ROLE OF THE RABBI IN JEWISH-CHRISTIAN RELATIONS

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While I have been invited to speak on "The Role of the Rabbi in Jewish-Christian Relations," the more appropriate title for my remarks would be, "The American Jewish Community: Its Silent Revolution."

Indeed, a most useful discussion could — and ought — to be devoted to the agenda of outstanding issues between Christians and Jews, and to the specific role of the rabbi and of the Synagogue in relating American Jewry to American Christendom. What I propose to talk about this evening is not unrelated to this theme. However, my remarks do bear a different emphasis than that probably anticipated by Rabbi Kelman and our chairman, Rabbi Chiel, when they first invited me to appear before you. Therefore, even as I thank them and you for this opportunity, I ask your indulgence for a somewhat arbitrary interpretation of the subject assigned to me in the convention program.

* * *

A silent revolution has taken place in Jewish life in America. Like all systemic revolutions, it is woven from multiple forces and therefore its overall design and meaning tend to be lost, even to those most directly affected.

The "silent revolution" I refer to is the emergence of Judaism as one of the three major faiths of America. Before this audience I need not dwell on this fact. The majority of rabbis, especially Conservative rabbis, ministering to suburban congregations, live daily the experience of serving as symbol and spokesman for Judaism as a majority faith.

As our colleague, Albert Gordon, has attested in his excellent study, *Jews In Suburbia*, to the Jew and non-Jew

"the Synagogue is . . . the nuclear and most important Jewish institution . . . . The Christian community looks upon the rabbi as the religious and hence primary leader of the Jews. Since it is religion which gives the Jew his distinctiveness, the rabbi's position is thus clearly reinforced by the non-Jewish community."

Professor Salo Baron, in his three-volume study, *The Jewish Community*, establishes as an indisputable reality that "the religious congregation, based on the voluntary allegiance of its members" is "the basic form of Jewish communal life" and is "the mainstay of all organized Jewish life" in the United States.

The Synagogue, as the vertical embodiment through time of the Jewish spirit and Jewish identity and the community federation, as the horizontal expression of Jewish values in philanthropy and social welfare, form the primary coordinates of the contemporary Jewish community scene.

It would be logical to assume that, in the context of democracy, the national organizational structure of Jewish life would reflect in some significant way this pattern of local Jewish communal organization. If democracy means anything at all, it assuredly must mean a process and method for enabling the will and the interests of the majority of the members of a community to determine the direction of their communal lives — who is to bespeak their interests, what should be the priorities of their collective activity (whether education, religion, Israel, social welfare, community relations, civic defense, or recreation), and how the funds they contribute are to be spent.

If one were to make an honest assessment of the present estate of national Jewish organizations, evaluated on the basis of their representativeness and their responsiveness to majority will, one could only conclude that our national communal life is far removed from democracy, both in concept and practice.

We have oligarchies, not unlike the communal oligarchies of medieval Jewish communities that were dominated by the self-perpetuating פרנסי המדינה. They presume to speak in behalf of millions of American Jews, although their actual membership numbers in the thousands. We have "managers" and "bureaucrats," secular versions of an ecclesiastical hierarchy; these are the ones who most frequently invoke the meta-myth of "the rabbonim" bent on dominating the community and transforming it into a latter-day air-conditioned theocracy. Posing the contrived threat of rabbinic domination on the one hand,

invoking on the other the catechistic slogans of "democratic process" and "voluntarism," the self-perpetuating bureaucracies manage to have a free hand in manipulating and controlling Jewish affairs, despite their limited mandate. We have fossils — organizational relics that at one time served a useful purpose, but refuse to go out of business now that their *raison d'etre* has expired. These continue to lope along on the momentum of the past, devising artificial projects to the drumbeats of publicity, draining off valuable funds that are desperately needed elsewhere for meaningful and urgent work. (We have reached a pass where the louder the publicity the less earnest and trustworthy the project. What this has meant to the undermining of the morale and confidence of our people is yet to be fully gauged.)

Nowhere is the contradiction between the concept and the practice of representative democracy in Jewish life more visibly apparent than in the respective positions of the national religious agencies vis-a-vis the non-religious agencies. We are told, and quite rightly, that "more Jewish men and women are identified with the Synagogue than any other organized body within the community" (*Jews In Suburbia*). More than three-fourths of American Jews are identified in some way with the Synagogue, and the only place in America where several hundred thousands of Jews can be found regularly assembled, week after week, is at Friday night services in the Synagogues (*American Jewish Yearbook* 1958, Arthur Hertzberg's article on Religion). Thus, the national extensions of the local Synagogues — that is, the national rabbinic and congregational associations — are the most representative agencies, at least numerically, of American Jews. Where else in Jewish life can you address a weekly audience of hundreds of thousands of our people?

Paradoxically, although the Synagogue is "the nuclear and most important Jewish institution" on the local community level, on the national scene it is something much less than nuclear. Granted that in recent years increasingly the national religious organizations have begun to play a significant role in formulating the national policies of the Jewish community in domestic and overseas matters. But, in final calculation, the decisive leadership of American Jewry continues to rest with the non-Synagogual agencies. Their budgets and staffs continue to be disproportionate to their numerical memberships.

They continue to send representatives to international, governmental, and inter-religious convocations who pose as emissaries of American Jewry, though no representative body of Jewry asked them to. They continue to make pronouncements which are neither particularly Jewish, nor again representative. They continue to carry out programs in Jewish culture, Jewish education, and indeed, Jewish religion, all the while blithely ignoring the existence of the rabbinic and congregational agencies, which were established much earlier and to carry out precisely these functions. While the national religious agencies discuss in convention assembled the fine points of "Who Speaks for the Jews?" our "operators" — the oligarchs and the bureaucrats — have already resolved the problem. It has been done, and without benefit of clergy.

All this is not to say that the non-synagogual agencies have not performed valiantly in behalf of American Jewry over the years. Their contributions to human rights and civil liberties, combatting prejudice, support of Israel and other worthy philanthropic and refugee relief efforts have earned for them the deep and abiding indebtedness of all Jewry. But this very gratitude for specific achievements might easily turn to resentment, and worse, if these agencies continue to refuse to accommodate themselves to the new realities of Jewish and American life.

What are these realities?

The primary and overarching reality is that the national Synagogual bodies, reflecting the dynamism of their constituencies, are emerging from long years of neglect and frustration, and are affirming their rightful place on the Jewish proscenium. Both as generic symbol of historic Jewish traditions and as the primary institution of contemporary Jewish identity, the Synagogue is beginning to insist that it be taken seriously as one of the major determinants of Jewish life. It refuses to be elbowed aside by the philanthropic nobility and the professional executives who for decades have dismissed the Synagogue and the rabbi in hostility-etched stereotypes. The Synagogue and the rabbi are writing *finis* to that fraudulent chapter of American Jewish history which witnessed the parading of rabbinic and synagogual agencies before the Christian community as the ecclesiastic face of Jewry, while the manipulating hand and voice were those of non-religious ventriloquists who smirkingly enjoyed the status of one of three major faiths of America even

while they ridiculed the foundation of that status, namely, their Judaism.

It is not to the power structures of Jewish communal life that I address my concern. With Lord Acton, I share the conviction that "power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely." The aphorism applies to all power formations, religious as much as secular. Synagogues and rabbinic leaders once in positions of power are subject to the same temptations and corruptions of office as anyone else (although I dare say a religious conscience leaves the door open a mite wider for appeal and *musar*). The Synagogue as a monopoly expressing its influence through coercive controls, and the rabbi as a *directeur de conscience* are both as invidious as any secular equivalent, and should be equally resisted. Any illusion that I am inferring such a status for the Synagogue and the rabbi should be dashed here and now.

It is the integrity, the truth, if you will, of the Jewish community about which I speak. And I submit that before the American public we have been guilty of untruthfulness and deception. To deceive the non-Jews, Jewish agencies have hired rabbis as religious symbol figures. Jewish agencies, whose programs are not remotely connected with Jewish religious concerns, are constantly demanding representation as one of the three major faith groups of America on public commissions, when, in truth, their activity if separated from the accident of being Jewish-manned, would entitle them to a lesser position.

The religious Jewish agencies themselves are not free from such abuses. Scan the social action resolutions adopted by the rabbinic and congregational agencies over the years on almost any subject: desegregation, immigration, church-state, religion and the public schools, bombing of synagogues, foreign aid, and the rest. Virtually without exception, the religious agencies have passed off on the community-at-large convention resolutions that were carbon-copies of the resolutions prepared and adopted earlier by the civic defense agencies or the non-sectarian civil liberties groups, the sole difference being that the religious agencies, tweaked by some conscience, grafted on a biblical quotation (seldom talmudic) for "religious ornamentation." I raise no question about the importance of these issues. But how long can the Synagogue continue to act as front-man? Compare the spirit, the character, the prophetic outcry of our "carbon copy" resolutions with the נפן and the

שאלות ותשובות — the social action resolutions — of previous Jewish communities! Compare these contemporary expressions of the Synagogue's moral conscience with those of the National Catholic Welfare Conference and the National Council of Churches. Keeping in mind the vast gulf that separates our theologies and the consequent differences in the formulations of our positions, I for one am distressed by the shabbiness of our performances as a religious community in this regard.

But hopeful changes are taking place. And these are the first harbingers of the silent revolution of which I have spoken. A slow but inexorable reorientation of Jewish life in America is in the process. Profound as they are real, these changes are molded by the characteristic historic forces that Salo Baron has incisively pointed up as having molded previous Jewish communities; namely, the "mystic urge for inner Jewish unity" and the "force of public law."

This mystique driving for visible expressions of the Jewish collectivity manifests itself in myriad ways — in the growth of two hundred community federations, of forty two local rabbinic associations and local Synagogue Councils, in the NCRAC, in the Synagogue Council of America, in the Council of Jewish Federations and Welfare Funds. Even the President's Club, with its pressure cooker techniques, is an expression of this historic drive.

While "the mystic urge for inner Jewish unity" is the ground upon which a meaningful Jewish communal life will ultimately be constructed, "the force of public law" may well become the more decisive factor. Throughout the whole of Jewish history, Jews have shared a collective will to form a community. We know this from such oft-repeated maxims as אין ישראל נאלין עד שיעשו אגודה אחת. But our history testifies that no Jewish community came into being apart from the forces and pressures of the external society. As far back as the Exilarch and the Geonim, through the Gemeinde, the Kehillah, the ועד ארבע ראוצות, the Consistoire, the Russian Jewish "Committees," and the state-recognized British United Synagogue, the decisive force that transformed the Jewish mystique for unity into the historic reality of a community was the insistent demand of the larger community (almost always the government) that the Jews govern themselves. The demand was motivated by the government's need for the Jews to collect taxes. But that challenge invariably provided the impulse for organization

that led to the creation of communal structures that added glory to Jewish life even as it made possible a creative survival.

Obviously, revolutionary changes have taken place in the world since the days of Napoleon and the Consistoires, and Casimir and the ועד ארבע האראצות. America of 1960 is no more like the France of 1800 than the Jews of Cleveland are like their forbears in Volozhin. And yet, with all the differences, there are historic forces at work on the Jews and the Jewish community of the United States which, if these continue apace, may become as decisive in transforming our community as were the tax-collecting origins of previous Jewish *kehillot.*

Nowhere is this better illustrated than in what has taken place within the Synagogue Council of America during the past five to eight years. For the greater part of its career, since it was established in 1926, the Synagogue Council has piddled along as the national coordinating agency of the Conservative, Orthodox, and Reform rabbinic and congregational agencies. At times of Jewish crisis, the Council reached heights of great usefulness as a clearing house and as an instrument for mobilizing the religious forces and opinion of the Jewish community. But by and large, I must confess that its history had been relatively undistinguished, certainly when compared to its potentiality.

Then a radical change occurred. Agencies of the United States Government, leaders in the national Protestant and Catholic organizations began to seek out the Synagogue Council as their liaison to the Jewish community. From personal conversations, it quickly became apparent that the non-Jewish community had had its fill of the multiplicity of Jewish organizations, their unending pressures, their conflicting claims that each spoke for the Jews of America. They wanted one address for the Jews, just as they had one address for the Protestants through the National Council of Churches, and for the Catholics through the National Catholic Welfare Conference. And understanding the Jews essentially as a religious community, they turned increasingly to the Synagogue Council as that address.

This conviction began to express itself in a pattern of activities. President Eisenhower summoned the Synagogue Council to the White House to provide the Jewish representative for the People-to-People movement. He asked the Council for the Jewish spokesman to state Judaism's convictions on the

foreign aid program from a platform shared by the President, the Vice-President, the Secretary of State, former President Truman, Adlai Stevenson, and the heads of both political parties. He wanted a Synagogue representative on the Board of Directors of the United States Committee for Refugees, which sponsors World Refugee Year.

Vice-President Nixon asked the Synagogue Council to sponsor, together with the National Catholic Welfare Conference and the National Council of Churches, a Religious Leaders Conference on providing equal job opportunity.

Secretary Flemming of the United States Department of Health, Education, and Welfare convened meetings in his office with representatives from these three major faith groups on social welfare issues.

President Eisenhower designated the Synagogue Council as the official coordinating agency for the Jewish community for the 1960 White House Conference on Children and Youth and the 1961 White House Conference on Aging. (In 1950, the Jewish representative was named from the American Jewish Committee.)

The United States State Department, on several occasions, expressed its gratitude to the Synagogue Council for joining together with the national Catholic and Protestant bodies in testimony before Senate and House foreign affairs committees in support of the foreign aid programs.

During these activities, a remarkable spirit of cooperation and confidence grew up among the representatives of the Catholic and Protestant agencies and the Synagogue Council. The National Council of Churches, which represents thirty four major Protestant and Eastern Orthodox denominations, informed its 145,000 member churches in an official communication that,

> "It is with the Synagogue Council of America that the National Council of Churches has the greatest degree of cooperative activity in matters affecting Christians and Jews."

And in a further demonstration of fraternity, the National Council invited the Synagogue Council to send an official delegate, the only Jew so invited, to its Fifth World Order Study Conference in Cleveland, November 1958. It was at that conference, incidentally, that the National Council

adopted its resolution to conduct an inquiry into the situation of the Jews in Russia, and also urged the safeguarding of the security of Israel.

In less public but in nonetheless significant ways has there developed a meaningful relationship between the Catholic leadership and the Synagogue Council. Not the least significant demonstration of mutual understanding has been the program of human relations which the Roman Catholic church has officially sanctioned the Synagogue Council to carry out in Catholic parochial schools in New York and New Jersey.

If one widens the focus of this picture to include the literally hundreds of organizations, — civic, religious, social welfare, non-governmental, United Nations, and mass media, — that have similarly turned to the Synagogue Council as the liaison to the Jewish community (I shirk from employing the term "headquarters" although that is precisely how many of these agencies look upon the Council) then it must be admitted that something important has been taking place.

One of the indices of this importance is the manner in which the agencies within the Synagogue Council have come to collaborate. Measured against previous competitiveness and rivalries, the present-day experiences of genuine cooperation among the three movements within the Synagogue Council are truly impressive to behold. Increasingly, as one sits through meetings of the various SCA committees and the executive and plenary bodies, the experience of a community at work registers with unmistakable force.

And this, one is aware, is but a beginning. Despite lack of finances, lack of staff, lack of publicity, lack of tools for communication, this new vitality has asserted itself. Perhaps it is "the mystic urge for inner Jewish unity" taking a new hold on life in America. Clearly the force of "public law" transmuted in the idiom of American democracy is a decisive factor.

It is worthwhile speculating what the growth of this development progressively during the next several decades may yet mean for American Jewry. Can it be that a true Gemeinde will emerge from the shambles of present confusion? Can a community morale be created that will establish for the rabbi his authentic role as scholar-saint? Can the Synagogue become the *Beth Am* in its noblest meanings?

As a popular Oriental benediction has it, "May you live in interesting times."