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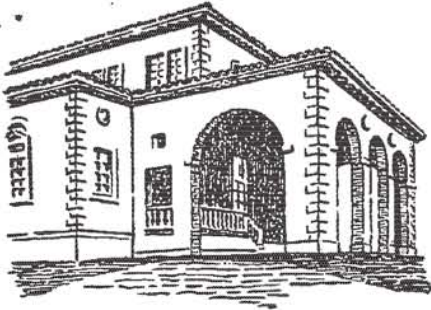
Preserving American Jewish History

MS-603: Rabbi Marc H. Tanenbaum Collection, 1945-1992.

Series B: Early Activities. 1945-1972

Box 8, Folder 8, Greenberg, Hayim, 1946.





Riverdale Temple

The Liberal Synagogue

HENRY HUDSON PARKWAY W. AND 246TH STREET
NEW YORK 63, NEW YORK

KINGSBRIDGE 3-0961

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Time for talking

NOTES OF ADDRESS OF DR. HAYIM GREENBERG BEFORE RABBINICAL ASSEMBLY 1946

I am not going to prophecy and I am not going to preach preachers. I have no figures. I have no data to base myself upon. But I am ^a disturbed Jew, a perturbed Jew. Without aspiring to give you tonight a solution of the problem. I should like, and perhaps that's why I should have preceded the other speakers, just to define the problem as I see it. *In my sermon during the next two days, I shall attempt to probe*

I do not know what a "chosen people" means. I know what it means historically; I don't know what it means metaphysically. I do not know ^{whether} whether we are today, if we ever were, a chosen or the chosen people-- and perhaps it doesn't matter. It's possible that we live in this world without awareness of being selected. But I know that there is no awareness, in no matter what kind of a Jew, of his belonging to a chosen people. He may repeat the phrase, but he is not aware of his being selected or of his fulfilling a mission, whatever the past and whatever the justification for this notion or idea in the past. But is that important?

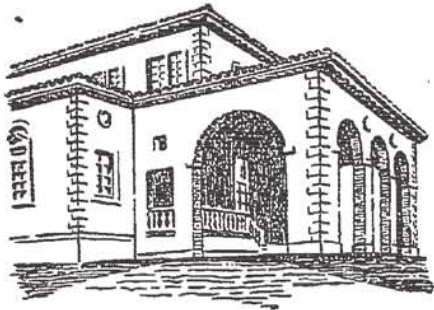
I ask myself, and ~~for~~ I would like to ask you: who are we today, I and every one of you and hundreds of thousands and millions of Jews in America and elsewhere; what are we as a group today?

I wouldn't apply this question to generations past. I know who they were, and what was the element of cohesion between one Jew and another Jew, between the individual Jew and the community as a whole, to ~~metalogically~~ differentiate between the two concepts.

I stress the word ~~metalogically~~ ^{metaphysically} because ^{is an actual practice} empirically in the past there was no dividing line between "am yisroel" and "knesseth israel". Whoever belonged to the Am Israel belonged, and not in a superficial sense of the word, to the "knesseth yisrael" as well. Our problem is what shall we do with the very many Jews who belong in a sense to "am yisroel" by heredity, biologically, and in a sense, even environmentally on the basis of some tradition, experienced tradition or rejected tradition,—but who do not belong any longer or are not aware that they belong to "knesseth israel" which is not an ethnic concept but a purely spiritual concept.

Well, I will tell you why I ask this question. Perhaps you will be amazed at listening to these words from a Zionist. Zionism means something to me; it always has, since the early days of my boyhood. But Zionism itself is in one of its elements or in one of its aspects a manifestation of a deep spiritual crisis in Jewish life. Zionism itself was an indication of a beginning of separation between the two concepts—"am israel" and "knesseth israel".

Since there is no logical necessity for a Jew who is a member of ~~or~~ let's say a citizen of the Jewish state to be at the same time a professing Jew, he may not be a professing Jew and ^{be} be a member of the Jewish commonwealth or a national of the Jewish state.



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This process of secularization was not something invented by Zionism, but it was a factor and a tendency recognized by Zionism, a phenomenon Zionism reckoned with, and Zionism, whether it formulated it in clear terms or not, drew certain conclusions about it.

Shall I tell you that I am disturbed about the future of Jews in Palestine; that I don't consider the question, let's say, of survival or future or creativity of not only the present-day Jewish community in Palestine, but of the millions, perhaps, of Jews, who, ~~as I hope~~, will live in Palestine? I am not worried about them.

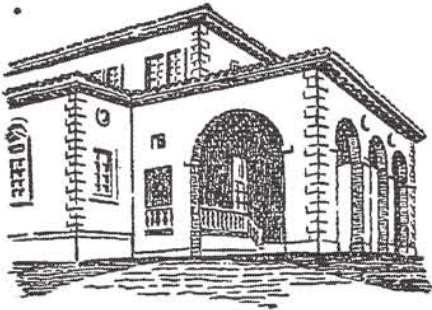
Who knows, perhaps, Zionism, is something more than it pretends or than it professes to be, and who knows what forces are operating in Jewish life, in Jewish history, what forces are leading us to Palestine.

~~Thousands~~ Thousands and thousands of Jews may think today that they are going to Palestine to settle there in order to remove the stigma from the Jewish people, to begin life anew as a normal people without attaching any particular spiritual or religious significance to that phenomenon. But it happened many times in the past. Saul was convinced he was going in search of his asses. I don't know whether he found the asses, but he found the kingdom of which he was not aware when he set ~~it~~ out. Something similar to that may happen in the future in Zionism, and to the new Jewish environment Zionism will create in Palestine.

But what disturbs me, what perplexes me, is not Jews in Palestine and not Zionists, to whom Zionism means a process of individual self-realization, in the sense of attaching themselves body and soul to the community and to the soul to the community and to the soul of Palestine, but what is the future of hundreds of thousands of Jews, millions of Jews, who are, perhaps, ~~doomed~~ destined for generations and generations to come to remain where they are? It's those that I am worried about. And I see no essential difference between American Jews and Jews in a number of other countries.

What is going on in Jewish life in America today is not something specifically American; it's a stage through which Jewry goes. That process ~~may~~ may begin tomorrow or in two or ~~three~~ three decades in Morocco, in Tunisia, in Algiers. Today it is a question of the western world only. Tomorrow it may become a problem for Jews in other countries.

We live, we want to live. We are afraid of collective death. Though we have hidden suicidal intentions, suicidal dreams, we are afraid of them. We want to survive and we want to live ~~in~~ a creative life. But the question is what could or should we live upon?



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Forgive me if I be for a few minutes brutal with you. I am brutal with you because I am brutal with myself. As a purely ethnic group, as an ethnic group only, as "am yisroel" or as a fraction of "am yisroel" without being at the same time "knesseth Israel" I see no hope for the future.

That does not mean the immediate disappearance of the Jewish group in this country. I am not thinking of assimilation, I do not see today the manners of assimilation in the accepted European continental sense of the world, and believe me, there is something worse even than assimilation—deterioration, atomization, degeneration. But it's possible for a generation or two, due to segregation from without and due to certain forces of inertia, to exist not as a distinguished group but as a distinct group, as a conspicuous group, somehow to exist, you might say—to vegetate. Not a promising future.

I do not believe that any linguistic panacea could solve this problem, be it Yiddish or Hebrew. Folk-lore, purely romanticist, or artistic appreciation of aesthetic values, created in the past, is not something a dispersed people can regard as a solution to its problem. It's impossible to cultivate Yiddish or Hebrew and to have a second or a parallel medium for our everyday communications and for creative art.

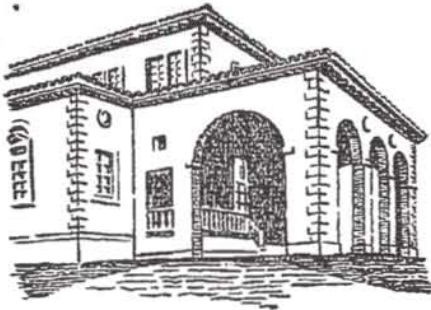
I see no hope unless we become again a "knesseth Israel" not ~~only~~ only a people of Israel.

Are we? We are institutionally; more institutionally than spiritually. And this is the core of the problem. Institutions may be created, bigger and bigger institutions. Then the institutions in the course of time are likely to turn into pieces of real estate if there is no soul and dynamic force in the institutions.

This is my question to you: Do we, the bulk of Jewish, modern Jews, still constitute a congregation in the classical Jewish sense of the word.

a book was called my attention,
A few years ago, ~~my friends, I happened to read~~ a Hebrew book published by American Jewry in Palestine, but written in Soviet Russia. This book was an exchange of correspondence between two rabbis in Soviet Russia—one was the rabbi of Bobruisk and the other of Pavlograd in the south of Russia.

Do you know what was the topic they had been discussing for a number of years in their correspondence—whether Soviet Jewry; what is the future of Russian Jews?



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And in one of the first letters of the younger rabbi, the rabbi of Pavlograd asked the Rabbi of Bobruisk whether from the point of view it is permissible for him, the younger rabbi of Pavlograd, to remain in the rabbinate. Why this question? He says: "We have a synagogue--it's empty. We have no Talmud Torah. We have no heder. We have nothing. But somehow a couple of hundred Jews living in Pavlograd are afraid of remaining without a Rabbi. But I have nothing to do. Wouldn't it be more desirable" he asked in one of his letters, "to resign and become a factory worker in Russia and at the same time remain a pious, (orthodox) traditional Jew as I am?"

And the other rabbi advised him not to resign. (The line of argument he used and the criterion he applied to what a rabbi is or should be is very interesting.) A rabbi should be in his world a functionless person. His only function is to study, to pray, and his house should be opened to other people; that's the only function of a rabbi.

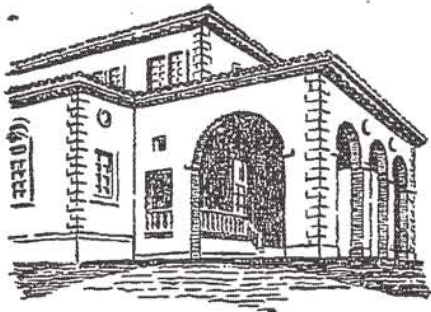
But that's not the important thing, and I tell you the story about the book not because I want you to adopt of the American scene that criterion provided from Bobruisk, but because the rabbi of Bobruisk refers to something else.

In his semi-rabbinical language he referred to an ~~about~~ idea about cycles in history. There are various cycles in human history. Fundamentally there are only two--the naturalistic cycle, as he said, and the metaphysical cycle. Now we are in the midst of a new naturalistic cycle, a secularist ^{or spiritual} and naturalistic cycle in highly industrialized countries, in countries with a technological civilization or in countries aspiring to create a technological civilization. And our duty, he writes in one of his letters, "is to be patient and wait. This new naturalistic cycle is going to commit suicide."

He says: "I see already the germs of death in this cycle, in this new naturalism. And then a new wave of the metaphysical outlook will seize Soviet Russia; not only Russia, the world as a whole; and the Jew will again find his place in the world and his language will be more understood than it is today. But in order to welcome the emergence of the new metaphysical cycle we must have you in Pavlograd and you must have me in Babruisk, and there must be hundreds of others like us in other places. That's your task."

I am not angry at a Jew who does not attend synagogue. I am not angry at a Jew who does not pray. I want to know why he doesn't go to synagogue; why doesn't he pray? If it's merely a "humra" then I don't want to pray. But if going to synagogue is not a "humra" but it is joy of life and if prayer enriches me, then without ~~me~~ reminding me I'll go to synagogue, I'll pray.

We are confronted here not ~~with~~ merely with the problem of desertion. It's not desertion. A Jew, or any other human being for that fact, who does not know what it means to have an hour of solitude, who doesn't know what to do with himself when he remains alone for an hour or



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two, if he has nothing to say to himself, only to others; if he has not developed the gift of contemplation—what makes you ask that Jew to be a professing, courageous Jew when he is empty, when he has no capacity for experiencing things?

It's a therapeutic question, and from that point of view, I don't recognize a rabbi if he is not a healer, if he cannot perform a therapeutic and educational task.

The question is not about asking Jews back to synagogue. There is something preceding, something prior to that question—how to awaken in that Jew the sense of values which he has lost, and, when the sense of values has already been reawakened in him, how to link up that sense of spiritual values with Judaism, and with the specific values of Judaism.

My question is whether we and you, and first of all you, rabbis, are in position now to start educational and healing activities leading toward a revival of religious values. No Jewish survival as an ethnic group is possible without that revival.

I don't like to use the word, it has many unpleasant historical connotations to me and to every Jew, but for the lack of a better term I employ it—do we have crusaders, crusaders for that general religious reawakening?

Crusaders must not necessarily be great scholars. It is a question of new vision, not of coming with new ideas, but with re-interpretation in terms of our generation, in terms of the 20th century, values which are ancient and which lend themselves, without any violence to them to be interpreted in our modern times.

It's not a question of having a smaller number of humra but perhaps a question of adding new humra which our ancestors could not have thought of because conditions of life were entirely different. The trouble with our so-called reform movements in today's world is that they want Jews to have very light baggage, not to be too greatly burdened. Perhaps, people are hungry for a sense of new duties to be performed. It's a question of a mission to the Jews, of educational missionaries to the Jews, missionaries for a new conversion of Jews to genuine Judaism. This is my question.