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"Why are the Assimilationists Wrong?" 4 May 1951.

For more information on this collection, please see the finding aid on the
American Jewish Archives website.

Friday night services

WILLIAM SCHENKEIN

2835 East Eighth Avenue

Denver 6, Colorado

Rabbi Herbert A. Friedman,
Temple Emanuel
16th & Pearl Streets,
Denver, Colo.

Dear Herbert,

You will remember that I wholeheartedly commended you on your beautiful presentation of your paper on assimilationism. At that time I pointed out to you that yours was but one side of the controversy. You agreed with me but stated that you could have no other point of view.

After I arrived home that Friday evening I tried to recall what you had said in your sermon. I came to the conclusion that you were not referring to members of the American Council for Judaism. Although I know nothing about Christian Science nor about the Congregational Church, I got the impression that you had in mind Jews who had left the Synagogue and had joined these churches.

When I came across the following article, I was sure that I was right, and felt that you would be interested.

From the Jewish Daily Forward of April 21, 1951.

by Dr. B. Hoffman-Zivion.

"Lessing Rosenwald, the founder of the American Council for Judaism, is a stubborn Jew. He holds on with his teeth and nails to the Jewish urge for existence. I do not know how large an organization is the Council for Judaism, nor does it interest me. What interests me most is what is it that prompts Rosenwald and other Jews of his type to keep up an organization dealing with Judaism. Lessing Rosenwald is among our Jews stamped as the greatest Jewish assimilationist in the United States. This is why I should like to know why Rosenwald is so concerned with keeping up a separate organization and by that advertise widely his Jewish affiliation. Real Jewish assimilators do not advertise their Jewish affiliation. They try to hide it wherever they can. One can say about Rosenwald what ever one cares, but no one can claim that he wishes to disassociate himself from the Jewish people or hide his Jewish identity. For me Lessing Rosenwald

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and other members of the ACJ are striking proof against assimilation. They do not want to be Jews like the Zionists, but they do not want to cease to be Jews as they understand Judaism. The Jews of the ACJ are not my Jews. I have much to say against the program of the ACJ, especially as it is formulated, but in our American Jewish life, I consider the Council more as an anti-assimilationist force than as an assimilationist. Its foundation is American Judaism and its aim is to sustain it."

This article by a Zionist writer, printed in a Yiddish language newspaper clearly expresses the other point of view, and one that I can subscribe to.

With kindest regards, I am,

Sincerely,

Bill

Sunday, May 13th.



"WHY ARE THE ASSIMILATIONISTS WRONG?"

There has always been in Jewish life a group of our people who have felt that the solution to the Jewish problem lies in the direction of assimilation. This attitude can be found as a steady theme which appears all through Jewish history, in every century and in every country. It appears today in America and here in Denver. I would speak about it this evening for I feel it is important for us always to redefine our attitude on this basic question, and always to analyze ourselves in relation to it. Although there are overtones of emotional excitement and passionate conviction in this question, let me attempt to deal with it as coolly and rationally as I can.

At the outset let me make it perfectly clear what I mean by assimilation. I am not referring to the process of "adaptation." "Adaptation" represents an adjustment which one makes to one's environmental conditions. To adapt means to make suitable, to fit, to adjust. Adaptation is a process not involving the root-feelings or root-instincts of any people. Adaptation is an external matter, and we have all adapted to the western culture in which we live. We have adapted to our environment in terms of language, for we speak English. We have taken off the garb and clothing of our ancestors who came to these shores from Europe, and with rare exceptions our people are no longer to be found in the caftan and the sidelock. Sometimes I think that in this process of adaptation, we have adjusted to the vulgarities of our environment with as much relish as we have taken on the happy positive external features of America. But be that as it may, whether we have adapted to the lowest, we certainly ^{try to} have adapted to the highest in our environment. Adaptation is a process of natural evolution and is done without breaking any of the chains of continuity with the past. In our adaptation to our environment I see no danger, I see no error. Rather do I think this is a natural process which is to be expected. - even a positive value?

To assimilate however is quite another thing. To assimilate means to make similar or to make alike. It means further, according to the definition, "to appropriate and incorporate into the substance of the assimilating body." The dictionary offers the example of food as an item which is assimilated. When you eat sugar, this sugar is absorbed or incorporated into the substance of the body which takes it in, and the very nature of the sugar is changed. Sugar becomes energy. To assimilate, therefore, means to absorb and change the nature of that which is being assimilated. In this we see the danger to our people and to our heritage. In this we have the simplest and most pristine answer to the question of the sermon tonight - "Why is assimilation wrong"- because assimilation will lead to the disappearance of the people. I want this distinction between assimilation and adaptation to be made perfectly clear. I have no objection to adaptation. I have a deep visceral objection to the faintest tinge of the process of assimilation.

I believe with simple conviction that those who are in favor of assimilation have as their ultimate objective the annihilation of the Jewish people in terms of its unique identity. Those among us who have become assimilationists do so out of a variety of motives, but beneath all desires is the primitive wish that there be no such fact as a Jew or factor as Judaism. Let me say to these people, as a first premise, that if the desire to obliterate Judaism emerges from the wish to provide security for one's self, so that one's own future may be more peaceful without the harassing burdens which being Jewish imply; that their desire will always remain frustrated. For this process of assimilation, particularly with the motive which I have just described, simply will not work. Just as the human digestive system disgorges some indigestible materials, so will the world always disgorge the body of Jews should they attempt to become assimilated into the majority culture pattern. Assimilation may very well work for single individuals here and there. And to these who genuinely wish to escape from the fate of their fathers, I extend the wish of success. For some individuals it is possible, and for those who desire this with all of the passion of their being, I wish good luck. I think that if they are clever

and skillful - if they change their names and move to another city - there is every chance in the world for them to assimilate and disappear into the digestive tract of the majority. But for the whole group to be swallowed up and to be digested I think is an impossibility. ¶ There may, however, be a different motive on the part of some who wish to assimilate. In this second instance the motive may be the desire to earn the respect of the Gentile. Our fearful Jew, or he who seeks the approbation of his neighbor, may ^{reason} think that, by some distorted or perverted analysis, that if he removes from himself as many of the distinguishing marks of his people of his ancestry, or if he removes himself some distance from the hard core of the Jewish community, that in this fashion he may earn the greater love or friendship of his Christian neighbor. If this be his motive, it is less craven than the first, and yet he too will meet with equal disillusion and frustration. For the true Christian, the one who often appreciates our heritage more than we do ourselves, will recognize in such a Jew an inauthentic figure. The true and noble Christian will feel somewhat uncomfortable in the presence of a Jew whom he witnesses being deliberately un-Jewish. Let me, in this instance, give you the words of Professor Karl J. Friedrich, professor of government at Harvard University.

Prof. Friedrich said: "Anyone who cherishes the richness of cultural life cannot but hope that the identity of the Jewish people will not be lost. They represent one of the most highly civilized and gifted groups. Their sensitivity toward moral issues, amounting almost to moral genius, constitutes an invaluable asset to the modern world. Neither assimilation nor isolation would produce the same striking enrichment as would the individual and collective participation of the Jews as Jews in the building of the future." (Democracy is, as a matter of fact, a system to which they, along with others, bring peculiar and important capacities. If the democratic world government is to come into existence, the Jewish people certainly have contributed and are contributing their share toward its realization.)

Prof. Friedrich, then, begs us to remain us as we are - natively and intuitively

Jews, for out of this background we employ all of the moral values and deep prophetic yearning for the creation of a better society upon this earth. He does not think we could make this contribution unless we were Jews. He does not think it would be significant if it did not come specifically and directly out of the Jewish heritage which gave birth to the great ideals of democratic and social living. Prof. Friedrich would be, I am sure, uncomfortable in the presence of a Jew whom he suspected of desiring to leave his group. Prof. Friedrich would be less respectful, not more respectful of such a man.

Regardless of which of the two motives, the first or the second, is operating upon this fellow of ours who would seek to leave the fold, he should know that the process by which he is attempting to assimilate will corrode him to his very core. The desire to escape is like an acid which will eat out his heart and his vitals. As the process proves fruitless, he will become filled with frustration and disillusionment. As this occurs, he will become saturated with the feeling of self-contempt. This is analogous to the mood which the psychiatrists describe of a man who tries to commit suicide and does not succeed. All of his strength is gone. He is eaten away inside with an inner self-hatred. Not only does he hate the world from which he has tried to escape, but he hates himself for his inability to control his own destiny. Of all of the ills and evils which befall man, I think you will agree that self-hatred or self-contempt are the worst of the possible evils which can befall us. Self-contempt, this corrosive acid, can destroy a man more quickly than anything except the speedy destructiveness of a bullet.

But even more than the destruction of himself, for which, after all he alone is ultimately responsible, there is in the conduct of the assimilationist ^{the} ~~that~~ power to destroy Judaism. This is ^{something} ~~some~~ larger value, ^{and more reprehensible.} ~~an attempt upon which should cause him to be brought before the bar of justice.~~ For in this case he seeks not only to destroy himself, but he would destroy his fellows as well. This is more than suicide. This is murder. ^{out} I must say that never before in the history of our people

has there been the faintest possibility that there would be enough of them dedicated to this path of assimilation so that the great bulk and body of our folk would be in danger by their conduct. Only here in America, where there is a cult of bigness about all things, is there the ~~paradoxical~~ possibility that the movement may eat away at the vitals of the entire folk. Paradoxically, total destruction by mass assimilation can occur only here in America, where we are the largest and richest Jewish community ever to be assembled in one spot at one time during all our long history.

Milton Steinberg, that brilliant and devoted analyst, has summed up the problem in one sentence. He said: "The ultimate decision is over the perseverance of the Jews as Jews. It consists in a choice between the House of Israel continuing in its historic enterprise or undertaking to liquidate itself and shut up shop." For me, I stand before this congregation and state that I am a Jewish survivalist. I am not here as rabbi and teacher to preside over the liquidation of the Empire of Judaism, if we may employ the words of Churchill. ~~I have not~~ I have not studied nor devoted myself to a conscious service in the cause of folk and faith to agree at this moment to liquidate and shut-up shop. I am a survivalist in the sense that I believe that the House of Israel will and must continue upon its historic enterprise and will and must do so with the assistance and dedication of the great mass of the Jews who will continue to live in this land. I am a survivalist because I believe that the values of Judaism are unique and that these values are responsible for the creation of much of civilization today. I am a survivalist not only because of what has been accomplished in the past and in the present, but because I believe that in the future there will again be an upsurge of singers and sages, poets and prophets who will make their voices felt from the new land of the Third Commonwealth of Israel, ^{as well as America} I stand at the crossroads between the past and the future and say that my people has lived nobly and greatly and that I wish them to live so ever and ever into the millennium to come.

I am this survivalist, this conscious, active, dedicated Jew, because I believe that America and the world want me to be that way. I attribute great weight to the words of the famous Catholic philosopher, Jacques Maritain, the leader of the neo-Thomist school in Catholic thought today. Maritain, one of the most highly respected religious philosophers of America today, says: "Israel is to be found at the very heart of the world's structure, stimulating it, exasperating it moving. Like an alien body, like an activating ferment injected into the mass, it gives the world no peace, it bars slumber, it teaches the world to be discontented and restless as long as the world has not God. It stimulates the movement of history." Maritain wants me to be an alien body, that is unassimilable, that is undigested by the great mass - for ^{see on} in ~~my~~ unassimilable uniqueness he ^{our} sees ~~my~~ potentiality for serving in the capacity of the gadfly to mankind.

If I need^{ed} substantiation or corroboration of this sentiment, ^{tho} ~~which~~ I think is superfluous and unnecessary to assemble, I would direct you to the words of John ^{Stewart} Mill, one of the spiritual founders of our nation. He spoke about the fact, in his book "On Liberty", that there is an America which nurtures the ideal of a free society, a society which he called in this classical treatise a world which provides "Freedom and variety of situation." He said: "The mere example of non-conformity, the mere refusal to bend a knee to custom, is itself a service." He had in mind the ideal of a free society, where men would retain their unique and individual differences, and where each would fructify the other with the best ~~which~~ ^{it} he had to offer in culture, in thought, in wisdom, and in aspiration and yearning. Only out of this grand complex of many strains of national backgrounds and diverse intellectual accomplishments could America become something which she is not yet but which she will one day be if each of us will remain true to his own destiny and give to ^{our country} ~~her~~ the best we can of our own special abilities and talents. The eager assimilationists, the runners with the herd, the patriots and the flag wavers, those who are afraid of being accused of double allegiance, these mimics and apes of everything which is foreign to themselves, are

not the men of whom John ^{Stuart} Steward Mill was speaking. They have nothing to do with the Americanism of Robert Frost who knows profoundly that fusion of all cultures and all peoples is not liberty and does not provide variety of form. Robert Frost said the famous line "Good fences make good neighbors." By this he meant that each man lives behind his fence and each man cultivates his ground as best he can, but that across the fence they exchange their friendly relationships. America wishes me to exercise the freedom of my faith and my ways, not to abandon them. America was made up of Separatists who came to Massachusetts Bay; Quakers lead by William Penn; Huguenots who came to New Rochelle and to Charleston. All these came here to establish and to exercise the varieties of their ways. America demands not that they yield these up to some unrecognizable and non-distinguishable nameless and formless face.

This matter of form, I submit, is of the essence. Without form there is nothing. Ludwig Lewisohn has just published a short and brilliant essay called "The American Jew." I was profoundly moved while I read it, for in it I found the most magnificently worded, clearly logical presentation of the case for strong and active and positive Jewish life. In this little essay, the sub-title of which is "The Character and Destiny of the American Jew," Ludwig Lewisohn explains away the blandishments and beguilements and seductions of those who would say that we must give up faith and form. He makes the point that we can save ourselves only by an historically-conscious, strongly-motivated will to survive as Jews within the uniqueness of our Jewish heritage. In discussing this question of form he says: "It cannot be too often repeated: form preserves; formlessness leads to disillusion. Only that which has form survives. The melted snow crystal which but now had an exquisite and unique pattern is a drop of water in the undifferentiated waters of the world. Israel's form, built by its way of life, is its assurance of survival, freedom, dignity, grace." When the snowflake is a snowflake it is a gorgeous crystal. When it melts it just becomes a blob of water. A Jew who wraps himself in the forms of his people, who lives the rich full lush life of positive Jewish observance and ceremonialism

in a variety of
ways?

presents to the world the same exquisite outlines as the crystal of snow on the window pane. The Jew who gives these up, or deliberately runs from them, or who seeks to destroy them, has become like the indistinguishable glob of water - ugly, formless, and doomed to trickle off into extinction.

Let me conclude by reminding you again of the cause for which our people fought against Rome ^{by early times} and fought against Hitler in the Warsaw ghetto. The cause was to vindicate and to defend the Jewish people as the incarnation of the experience at the foot of Sinai. We had at the foot of that mountain the great earth-shaking soul-shattering experience, which we have transmitted to the world through two daughter religions. We accepted then the word of God and said that we would live by it in all of its moral grandeur and simplicity. We said then that we would become a nation of priests and the holy people, in order that we might transmit to mankind the flash of insight which belief in God demands. We said then, in a tiny corner of the Sinai Dessert, to a tiny group of grubby dessert tribes and insignificant clans, words of affirmation and words of promise which have echoed down the corridors of time to inspire all men to all the great deeds which western civilization has accomplished. This is the meaning of the historic enterprise to which Milton Steinberg referred. We embarked upon it with the special hand of God laid upon us. We have continued with unfaltering zeal and with a certain grace and elegance which even our most barbaric persecutors were never able quite to destroy. The delicacy and devotion, the grace and the godliness, the utter child-like faith have been those factors which have preserved us. Take this as the rock-like core of Judaism, ^{some of} garb it in the garments of forms and ceremonies which ~~are~~ our people have evolved, and present this to your children with passionate conviction that in form and faith, the combination of belief and procedure, you are giving them a way of life of unparalleled excellence.

Within this context Zionism is perfectly understandable. Zionism is not merely another nationalistic movement in a world already too full of "small nationalistic prisons". Zionism, says Mr. Lewisohn, "Is a religiously inspired force of which the

aim is the preservation of the Jewish people in its integral character. And this will of the Jewish people, not only to survive, but to survive as this people, the people of the experience of Sinai," is the deep and ~~inner~~ internal meaning of the historic enterprise upon which we are launched.

It is this which I seek to defend with all my soul and all my being. It is this which Reform Judaism of America has today come to understand with greater clarity than ever before. If the Jews of America are coming to us in their multitudes in the future, then we must serve Judaism well, by providing for them not some diluted minimalized program which ^{will} inevitably lead to self-destruction and assimilation. But we must provide for them a maximal program of education for their children, richness of ceremonial life for themselves in their homes, and the strongest and most affirmative principles of positive Judaism here in the synagogue. If we are to garner to ourselves many Jews in the future, then we will serve the cause ill if we submit to the lowest common denominator of form and faith. We must strive ever for higher forms and higher ideals of faith, so that in America the Jewish people and the Jewish religion will represent something separate and distinct and unique and shining. And in this uniqueness and in the separateness and ^{out of} ~~in~~ this proud Judaism will we make our best contribution to the culture of America.

Assimilation is wrong because it will lead to the death of people and religion. I hope and pray that you and your children and your children's children will always remain proud and positive and affirmative Jews.

Amen

Friday Eve Sermon

"WHY ARE THE ASSIMILATIONISTS WRONG?"

There has always been in Jewish life a group of our people who have felt that the solution to the Jewish problem lies in the direction of assimilation. This attitude can be found as a steady theme which appears all through Jewish history, in every century and in every country. It appears today in America and here in Denver. I would speak about it this evening for I feel it is important for us always to redefine our attitude on this basic question, and always to analyze ourselves in relation to it. Although there are overtones of emotional excitement and passionate conviction in this question, let me attempt to deal with it as coolly and rationally as I can.

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But even more than the destruction of himself, for which, after all he alone is ultimately responsible, there is in the conduct of the assimilationist that power to destroy Judaism. This is some larger value, an attempt upon which should cause him to be brought before the bar of justice. For in this case he seeks not only to destroy himself, but he would destroy his fellows as well. This is more than suicide. This is murder. I must say that never before in the history of our people

has there been the faintest possibility that there would be enough of them dedicated to this path of assimilation so that the great bulk and body of our folk would be in danger by their conduct. Only here in America, where there is a cult of bigness about all things, is there the ~~possibility~~ possibility that the movement may eat away at the vitals of the entire folk. Paradoxically, total destruction by mass assimilation can occur only here in America, where we are the largest and richest Jewish community ever to be assembled in one spot at one time during all our long history.

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If I need substantiation or corroboration of this sentiment, which I think is superfluous and unnecessary to assemble, I would direct you to the words of John Stewart Mill, one of the spiritual founders of our nation. He spoke about the fact, in his book "On Liberty", that there is an America which nurtures the ideal of a free society, a society which he called in this classical treatise a world which provides "Freedom and variety of situation." He said: "The mere example of non-conformity, the mere refusal to bend a knee to custom, is itself a service." He had in mind the ideal of a free society, where men would retain their unique and individual differences, and where each would fructify the other with the best which he had to offer in culture, in thought, in wisdom, and in aspiration and yearning. Only out of this grand complex of many strains of national backgrounds and diverse intellectual accomplishments could America become something which she is not yet but which she will one day be if each of us will remain true to his own destiny and give to her the best we can of our own special abilities and talents. The eager assimilationists, the runners with the herd, the patriots and the flag wavers, those who are afraid of being accused of double allegiance, these mimics and apes of everything which is foreign to themselves, are

not the men of whom John Steward Mill was speaking. They have nothing to do with the Americanism of Robert Frost who knows profoundly that fusion of all cultures and all peoples is not liberty and does not provide variety of form. Robert Frost said the famous line "Good fences make good neighbors." By this he meant that each man lives behind his fence and each man cultivates his ground as best he can, but that across the fence they exchange their friendly relationships. America wishes me to exercise the freedom of my faith and my ways, not to abandon t' em. America was made up of Separatists who came to Massachusetts Bay; Quakers lead by William Penn; Huguenots who came to New Rochelle and to Charleston. All these came here to establish and to exercise the varieties of their ways. America demands not that they yield these up to some unrecognisable and non-distinguishable nameless and formless face.

This matter of form, I submit, is of the essence. Without form there is nothing. Ludwig Lewisohn has just published a short and brilliant essay called "The American Jew." I was profoundly moved while I read it, for in it I found the most magnificently worded, clearly logical presentation of the case for strong and active and positive Jewish life. In this little essay, the sub-title of which is "The Character and Destiny of the American Jew," Ludwig Lewisohn explains away the blandishments and beguilements and seductions of those who would say that we must give up faith and form. He makes the point that we can save ourselves only by an historically-conscious, strongly-motivated will to survive as Jews within the uniqueness of our Jewish heritage. In discussing this question of form he says: "It cannot be too often repeated: form preserves; formlessness leads to disillusion. Only that which has form survives. The melted snow crystal which but now had an exquisite and unique pattern is a drop of water in the undifferentiated waters of the world. Israel's form, built by its way of life, is its assurance of survival, freedom, dignity, grace." When the snowflake is a snowflake it is a gorgeous crystal. When it melts it just becomes a blob of water. A Jew who wraps himself in the forms of his people, who lives the rich full lush life of positive Jewish observance and ceremonialism

presents to the world the same exquisite outlines as the crystal of snow on the window pane. The Jew who gives these up, or deliberately runs from them, or who seeks to destroy them, has become like the indistinguishable glob of water - ugly, formless, and doomed to trickle off into extinction.

Let me conclude by reminding you again of the cause for which our people fought against Rome and fought against Hitler in the Warsaw ghetto. The cause was to vindicate and to defend the Jewish people as the incarnation of the experience at the foot of Sinai. We had at the foot of that mountain the great earth shaking soul shattering experience, which we have transmitted to the world through two daughter religions. We accepted then the word of God and said that we would live by it in all of its moral grandeur and simplicity. We said then that we would become a nation of priests and the holy people, in order that we might transmit to mankind the flash of insight which belief in God demands. We said then, in a tiny corner of the Sinai Desert, to a tiny group of grubby dessert tribes and insignificant clans words of affirmation and words of promise which have echoed down the corridors of time to inspire all men to all the great deeds which western civilization has accomplished. This is the meaning of the historic enterprise to which Milton Steinberg referred. We embarked upon it with the special hand of God laid upon us. We have continued with unfaltering zeal and with a certain grace and elegance which even our most barbaric persecutors were never able quite to destroy. The delicacy and devotion, the grace and the godliness, the utter child-like faith have been these factors which have preserved us. Take this as the rock-like core of Judaism, garbed in the garments of forms and ceremonies which ~~amx~~ our people have evolved, and present this to your children with passionate conviction that in form and faith, the combination of belief and procedure, you are giving them a way of life of unparalleled excellence.

Within this context Zionism is perfectly understandable. Zionism is not merely another nationalistic movement in a world already too full of small nationalistic prisms. ~~Zionism~~ ^{Zionism} says Mr. Lewinson, "Is a religiously inspired force of which the

aim is the preservation of the Jewish people in its integral character. And this will of the Jewish people, not only to survive, but to survive as this people, the people of the experience of Sinai," is the deep and ~~that~~ internal meaning of the historic enterprise upon which we are launched.

It is this which I seek to defend with all my soul and all my being. It is this which Reform Judaism of America has today come to understand with greater clarity than ever before. If the Jews of America are coming to us in their multitudes in the future, then we must serve Judaism well, by providing for them not some diluted minimalized program which inevitably lead to self-destruction and assimilation. But we must provide for them a maximal program of education for their children, richness of ceremonial life for themselves in their homes, and the strongest and most affirmative principles of positive Judaism here in the synagogue. If we are to garner to ourselves many Jews in the future, then we will serve the cause ill if we submit to the lowest common denominator of form and faith. We must strive ever for higher forms and higher ideals of faith, so that in America the Jewish people and the Jewish religion will represent something separate and distinct and unique and shining. And in this uniqueness and in the separateness and ~~in~~ ^{out of} this proud Judaism will we make our best contribution to the culture of America.

Assimilation is wrong because it will lead to the death of people and religion. I hope and pray that you and your children and your children's children will always remain proud and positive and affirmative Jews.

Amen