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VAHC

LAST DAY OF SUKKOS
SIMCHAS TORAH

"The Eternal Cycle of Jewish Education"

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At the beginning of every Jewish year, during the great High Holy Days, the eternal values of Judaism are re-enunciated and all the basic themes of our religion are stressed, so that the people may be reminded of the foundations of our faith. On Rosh Hashonah, there is re-asserted the belief in the sovereignty of God. On Yom Kippur the lessons of humility and self-searching are taught. And on the last day of Sukkos, the value of Jewish education is re-enacted in the pageantry of Simchas Torah.

On this happy occasion of the Rejoicing of the Law, when the annual cycle of weekly readings is completed at the end of Deuteronomy and is begun again with the thrilling first words of Genesis, the Torah Scrolls are lifted high and carried around the Temple in proud and joyous parade - a symbol of the reverence in which they are held, and the happiness felt at concluding another year of sacred study. The parade is an outpouring of emotion, a celebration based upon a sense of accomplishment. Almost as a delirious crowd hoists its football hero upon its

shoulders, or as the king is borne on high by faithful and devoted retinue - so the Jews carry their Torah, in a combined mood of exaltation and worshipful respect.

Psychologically, this type of celebration is very interesting. It reveals clearly the homage Judaism pays to learning and education. After all, the Torah Scroll - the object of all this affection - is but a book, the five volumes of Moses, and such veneration of a book is not to be found in many other culture-patterns. The fact that our religion centers about a book, and not about a king, a priest, or a general, indicates most strikingly the emphasis we put upon education.

There is a little parable in one of the poems to Midrash Lamentations which illustrates this concept most graphically:

"Rabbi sent R. Assi and R. Ammi on a mission to organize (religious education in) the cities of the land of Israel. They came to a city and said to the people 'Bring us the guardians of the city', They fetched the captain of the guard and the magistrate. The two Rabbis exclaimed, 'These the guardians of the city? These are its destroyers!' (i.e. if you rely solely upon the army and the law, the city will certainly be destroyed). The people inquired, 'Who, then, are its guardians?' and the Rabbis answered, 'The teachers in Bible

and Mishrah, who meditate upon, teach and preserve the Torah day and night.' This is in accordance with what is written in Scripture, "Thou shalt meditate therein day and night" (Joshua 1:8), and it is similarly stated, "Except the Lord build the house (i.e. unless it is built upon the basis of education in the divine precepts), they labor in vain that build it." (Psalm 127:1)

Morris Joseph, the celebrated Jewish theologian and analyst, wrote in his authoritative volume "Judaism as Creed and Life" a similar evaluation of the role of education in the preservation of our heritage. His words are sharp and clear:

"For the Jew, religious education has been the bulwark of moral and social stability. 'the world itself', the Talmud declares 'rests upon the breath of the children in the schoolhouse!.....' The Jew sees that religious teaching is a species of communal insurance."

Insurance does not help the dead. It simply provides that the coming generation of the living will not be in want. So, in the sense that Dr. Joseph uses the term "communal insurance", religious education is designed to provide every future generation of Jews that support necessary to sustain our heritage. We take out insurance by

training our children in the faith of their fathers - by teaching them the ceremonies and rituals, the history and literature, the beliefs and theology - by inculcating a vibrant love of Judaism. And when the fathers die, the insurance is paid, communally speaking, for the children do not hesitate or flounder but carry forward the great truths which they have been taught, thus perpetuating all we hold dear.

Some of the religious communities of the world today are complaining that their most dangerous enemy is secularism - a drifting away of their followers from the religious motifs and a relapse into a purely materialistic, money-seeking, non-spiritual way of life. I do not feel that this is the greatest enemy of Judaism. Rather than secularistic materialism, do I fear the enemy of ignorance and apathy. There can be no Judaism existing in the abstract. Our religion exists only insofar as Jews practice it. And if our people do not know how they are supposed to act or what they are supposed to believe, but are wallowing in the trough of sheer ignorance, the religion will surely perish.

Did our ancestors die as martyrs for a faith, so that we today could permit it to disintegrate through simple lack of knowledge? What would the Jews of the Maccabean era have said if they had thought that we would allow to go by default that treasure for which they endured

Syrian spears? Do we honor the memory of those who fell under the Crusader's swords "Al-Kiddish-Hashem," as martyrs who died rather than convert, by permitting our youth to grow up unaware of the values for which they were willing to be sacrificed?

No - the haunting echoes which come down through the corridors of time and space, speaking to us of an unconquerable belief in God and Judaism, demand of us a loyalty at least comparable. We owe it to our ancestors to carry into the future that cause which they bore on their proud and weary shoulders up to this day.

The Rabbis of the Talmud said that it was permissible to sell a synagogue in order to buy a school, but it was forbidden to sell a school in order to buy a synagogue. They considered Jewish education even more important than worship and prayer. With education thus at the very core of Jewish existence, it is no wonder that its value should be stressed in the High Holy Day period of observance. On Simchas Torah, we parade the Book, happy that we have completed reading it, and joyfully turn to its immediate re-perusal. Actually, tradition has it that when the last line of Deuteronomy has been intoned, the reader goes on without interruption to the first line of Genesis, so that literally, not only symbolically, our study of Jewish lore should

be continuous.

It is remarkable how externally valid is our religion! The things we strive for today, our fathers also sought - as will our children in years to come. We are seeking to revive the Concluding Day of Sukkos as a holiday devoted to Jewish learning, and we find that this is not a new thought at all. There is a perfectly wonderful sermon preached by Dr. Kaufman Kohler, one of the pioneers of the Reform Movement in America, devoted to the identical theme. He spoke these words from the pulpit of Temple Beth-El in New York (later merged to form Temple Emanuel) in 1901, almost a half-century ago. His sermon was entitled "Israel's Rejoicing in the Law." It read in part:

"I want to speak on Simchas Torah and to plead for the revival of this ancient synagogue festival in our midst....An outpouring of religious enthusiasm was transferred to Simchas Torah as the culmination of Sukkas joy. Indeed there was genuine rejoicing over Israel's glorious heritage of the Law manifested on that day....But the question for us is: Is all this flow of sentiment, this joy of the spirit, a matter of the past, a mere reminiscence of days long gone? Can and should it not find its echo, its deep resonance in our own

hearts if voiced in proper and impressive form?

Look at the Shabuoth festival! The beautiful rite of Confirmation invested the Day of the Giving of the Law with new life, with new charm and vigor, because it thrills all hearts with new zeal and love for the sacred inheritance.

So could the Feast of Rejoicing of the Law again be rendered one of the most impressive festal days of the synagogue, if, as a Children's Festival, in connection with the annual re-opening of the Religious School, it would rally old and young around Israel's banner of the Law and fill the hearts of our little ones with joy and pride at the privilege of being God's chosen banner-bearers of the world's truth."

And Dr. Kohler's proposal has actually come to pass. Many religious schools of the country now have what is called a Consecration Service, held at the beginning of every school year, during the last day of Sukkos, upon which occasion all the youngest children in the pre-school class and the first grade, who are coming to religious school for the first time, are consecrated to the study of their faith. Here in Temple Emanuel, Denver, we have held this service for several years. It was my great joy to initiate it at a time when it

was practiced in only a few Temples in the land. Today it has happily spread and is quickly becoming well-nigh universal.

The altar is decorated with a full-size Sukkah; the children are ushered into the Temple on the Friday evening of Sukkos week, as close to Simchas Torah as possible; they are seated on the altar, and a service is prepared which they will find comprehensible. All participate in the singing of the Kiddush, using little individual cups of grape juice, and an informal interview takes place in which they are questioned as to the occasion, so that it becomes perfectly clear to them where they are and what is taking place. Their answers are often humorous, but all get the point that they are being consecrated under the Sukkah at the beginning of their religious study, and that they will stand on the altar again ten years hence to be blessed anew upon the occasion of their Confirmation. It is tremendously impressive to little children and launches them (and their parents) on a career of Jewish study, with a sense of the beauty and dignity of Judaism.

The High Holy Day period is the greatest emotional experience of the Jewish year. A pitch of loyalty and devotion is achieved which summons all Jews to attend their Temples and inspires them for the year

ahead. It is most fitting that the theme of Jewish education, as expressed through reading the Torah and celebrating that reading on the Last Day of Sukkos, should be considered worthy enough to be included in these great and majestic Holy Days. Indeed, if the prophetic phrase "From Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem" is to find fulfillment in any sense whatsoever, consummation must come through the schools and teachers of religion, through the class-room and the text-book. There is nothing more important. Our ancestors must have perceived this truth when they arranged that the High Holy Days should conclude on this note of the primacy of Jewish education.

