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The Duty of Self-Respect, 1937.

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THE DUTY OF SELF-RESPECT

With special reference to the wisely discussed article
on the so-called Jewish persecution-complex
called "Where the Jews Fail".

By
Rabbi Abba Hillel Silver

At
The Temple

On
Sunday morning, October 17, 1937

"Where the Jews Fail" is the title of an article which has received more attention than it rightfully deserves. It is not well-written. It is not very well thought out. But because it appeared in an important periodical, because it touches a theme which is close to the heart of Jewry, it has provoked considerable comment and discussion.

The central theme of this article is that the Jews are suffering from what the author calls a "martyr complex", a "persecution complex". He says that from his early childhood he was made aware that he was a Jew in his home, in his religious school. He was made conscious of the fact that he was different, that there was such a thing as a Jewish problem. As he grew older he came to be impressed with two unfortunate facts: first that the Jews do not act like a normal people and secondly that "nobody can make an honest effort to probe the secret of Jewish differences lest his head figuratively roll in the sand."

Jews, according to this writer, are "hyper-sensitive". Non-Jews dare not criticise them lest they be charged with being "prejudiced". And Jews who criticise their own people are branded as "renegades".

The writer, however, is not afraid to say this very thing, to probe differentiation. He knows that he will lay himself open to criticism and endeavors to forestall this by saying that he does not desire and never did desire to avoid being known as a Jew. In fact, he is the son of a rabbi. It is therefore clear that he cannot be charged with "prejudice". The writer does not indicate what his present convictions are or what his positive attitude towards

Judaism is and what contacts with Jewish life he has had. It is seemingly enough in his eyes to state that he does not want to avoid being known as a Jew and that he happens to be the son of a rabbi to forestall and allay all criticism..... Some of the choicest morsels of antisemitism have been provided the antisemite through all the ages by Jews. Where did they get it?

I am assuming that this writer is not malicious. He is well intentioned. But as I read his article, I was reminded of what Heinrich Heine once said of a man who had good intentions but whose performance was that of a fool: "Truly he deserves to go to Heaven for it and there be thrashed every day with rods".

It is, of course, not true that Jews resent honest criticism. There is a vast literature on antisemitism, much of it written by non-Jews. Very recently there appeared two important books, one by Professor Hugo Valentin and another by Count Kalergi. Both of these are serious works treating the subject objectively as a scientific problem. I am sure that this particular writer never heard of these books or he could not have written his article. As far as Jewish writers on the subject of antisemitism are concerned, there are thousands of volumes in the libraries. Very recently there appeared two important works by F. Bernstein and Arnold Zweig which are pieces of critical research in this vast field. They are not written from the point of view of apologetics but from the point of view of critical research.

As far as the Jews are concerned, they have never been sparing with criticism of themselves. They have been almost ruthless in criticising themselves, in exposing their own weaknesses and shortcomings. All you have to do is to read your Bible, to read the literature of the Middle Ages to understand how insistent the Jews have always been in not permitting themselves to be allowed into any sense of complacency from self-analysis, from aspiring to reach higher levels. These writers, preachers, prophets were not denounced as renegades. The Jewish people welcomed the criticism of these teachers even when they spoke harshly. They were convinced that the motive of these men was sincere, that their approach was a scientific one, and that their information on the subject was adequate. But the Jews are resentful and have a right to resent the irresponsible scribbler who flies off the handle and who rushes in where angels fear to tread, who does not even take the trouble to read up on the subject and with such brazen dogmatism characteristic of a smart-aleck sophomore writes such an article. Times are too serious today for uninformed amateurs in the field of Jewish thought, Jewish writing to set themselves up as authorities on Jewish psychology and on the philosophy of Jewish experience...

He proceeds to probe the secret of this Jewish differentiation and he discovers the answer without much difficulty. Jews, he says, are different because they want to be different. Everything in his home and in his religious school tended to remind him of this difference, of the fact that he belonged to a persecuted race.

For example, when Chanukah was celebrated in his home, his parents made him sing the "Rock of Ages" which had in it the phrase "children of the martyr race". This idea was dinned into his mind until it became a part of his very being. Almost the first words he understood, he says, were the "oppressed people," "martyrs", "prejudice", "persecution". The festivals of Passover and Purim also made him aware of stories of Jewish persecution in the past. In Sunday School he learned a great deal about ghettos, badges, pogroms, the Spanish Inquisition and the Protocols of Zion. All that gave him a first class case of mild paranoia.

He confesses that he did not learn much about the teachings of Judaism. That unfortunately must have been the fault of his religious school or his home training because intelligent religious training stresses the nobility of Jewish morality, the exalted concepts of Jewish religion. Intelligent religious training tries to evoke all the poetry of Jewish ceremonials, Jewish traditions, so as to fill the soul of the child with adoration, with rich bewilderment, with beauty, reverence, with happiness. The dark chapters of our history which unfortunately are there and are all too numerous are only used and should only be used as a background against which to ~~build~~ point out Jewish heroism, Jewish achievement in the past and to teach courage. When a father and mother, together with their children stand in front of the Chanukah tapors and kindle the lights ,,... they sing the song "The Rock of Ages". The stanza in which this phrase which gave this writer a mild case of paranoia, the actual stanza in which phrase the "martyr race" is taken is the following:

"Children of the martyr race
Whether free or fettered
Wake the echoes of the songs
Where ye may be scattered.
Yours the message cheering
That the time is nearing
which shall see
All men free
Tyrants disappearing!.....

What is wrong with it? Why should that give a young boy a sense of persecution? Quite the contrary it should give that man a sense of courage, confidence.

His complaint again is that the past is too much with us, that we interpret the efforts of our daily life in terms of the past and that therefore we become abnormal in our dealings and our relationships with other people. The past is too much with us. And what of the present? How are we to interpret our daily lives? In terms of what is happening today? What is happening today? Here, now, not two thousand or three thousand years in Egypt, in Persia but here, in 1937. Is it from the Sunday School that a young Jewish boy or girl has to learn about the persecution of our people? Why everyday he reads it in the daily newspapers. Within the week our newspapers were filled with stories of Jewish students in Poland, Jewish students in the high schools and universities who were not permitted to sit in the classrooms in the same rows with non-Jews. They were to sit on separate ghetto benches. The Jewish students refused to do that. They barricaded themselves in their rooms and went on a hunger strike not to be branded with the brand of the ghetto in 1937 as their people had been in the

Middle Ages. Oh, it would be easy enough and pleasant enough to forget the past if the past were so utterly unlike the present. Unfortunately that isn't the case. The present in Germany is worse than the past in Germany. The present in Poland is worse than the past in Poland. The present in many free countries is worse than the past. Therefore we turn to our past for guidance and for courage. Therefore we teach our people the history of our people so as not to become demoralized, so as not to become discouraged with what is happening in the present. Knowledge of how we survived similar episodes in our past will help us to draw deep draughts of courage for the present.

I could forgive the writer these trite comments about gaining the persecution complex in school or in the home. But when he passes from that to his other thesis that the Jew uses prejudice as a cloak for his own deficiencies and that the Jew is largely responsible for it and to illustrate, as is frequently done, uses the isolated case of his own personal experience, this writer unconsciously joins hands with the enemies of our people. Thus, for example, he says that when a Jew fails to land a job or is not permitted to join a club or rent a home, he is always prone to say that this is due to prejudice. Actually, he says, it isn't. He recounts from his own personal experience how a Jewish pupil in his class terrorized the teacher. He was a lazy youngster. He would go home and tell his parents that his teacher "picked" on him because he was Jewish. This man actually writes this down as a typical case of how Jewish children terrorize teachers.

Then he calls attention to the college he attended, where prejudice was unknown but where Jewish parents made the astonishing

charges as he puts it, that their sons failed to make a team because they were Jews, that they failed to enter fraternities because they were Jews, that they failed to make an office in the school for that fact. One wonders when one reads an article like this where this man has been living all this time, in what isolated town, in what fool's paradise. Is he not aware of the large-scale discrimination which goes on in so many industries against the employment of Jews? Is he not aware of how progressively difficult it is becoming for young Jews and Jewesses to obtain positions, to even get a chance? Has he not read a book like "Christians Only" by Heywood Broun which tells the whole miserable story of antisemitism? What sense is there in hiding your head like an ostrich? Has he forgotten, or perhaps he never knew of the statement which was made by Ludwig Borne, a German, about the Jews - "one hates Jews not because they deserve it, not because they earn it, because they earn a living." The bitter economic conditions in so many parts of the world are feeding antisemitism. Has he tried to enter a non-Jewish fraternity?

Unfortunately, this young man seems to be naive enough or deluded enough to think that prejudice, whenever it is practised, is only practised against the dirty class, the uncouth, the unmannered Jew, that there is no prejudice against the fine Jew, the cultured Jew. That is the sweet delusion which so many Jews, especially of earlier stock who have two decades start. ~~EXX~~ They think that prejudice is not directed against them but against the other Jews. That, unfortunately, is what the Jews in Germany

thought, too. When the fury finally broke in Germany and the Nazis got into power, these people awoke to the realization that they were the real butts, that it was against the cultured, the well-mannered, the high-class Jews in Germany and not against the poor struggling devils who had just come in as immigrants against whom the fury broke.

The Jew is hypersensitive, according to this writer. That, of course, is no new revelation. It would be a miracle if the Jews were not hypersensitive. What this writer brings ^{out} as proof is the protest which the Jews have made against the teaching of the "Merchant of Venice" in the schools of our land. Those who protest, according to this writer, are in total ignorance. Then he points out one very eloquent and beautiful passage in which Shylock proclaims that the Jew is not only a human being but is a man first and a religionist subordinates. Therefore, what is there to protest about?, he says. In fact, to protest against such a play is an act to stifle honest expression.

This irresponsible supercilious broad-mindedness is one of the very things which cause the bitterness and resentment of the Jews against such writers. The Jew has no objection to teaching the play in colleges and universities to adults who can analyze and evaluate it. No Jew has ever protested against that. We do, however, protest against the teaching of this play to young boys and girls of high school age, against giving them their first literary contact with the Jew as a bloodthirsty person who, at all costs, would take a pound of flesh. Anyone who has a smattering ^{of} psychology will understand

such a protest. This protest he attributes to Jewish hypersensitiveness.

Je knows that there is something like antisemitism in the world. Let's forget about it, he says. That is a new solution. We can't do anything about it. Let's forget about it. Let's reconstruct our relationship with those people who are reasonable human beings. We have cooperated with the Gentile in every field of human endeavor - in the social field, in the political field. Let us cease looking at them with accusing eyes. I don't know that we have looked on the non-Jews with accusing eyes. "Let us return from the wailing wall to the normal paths of life". The Jew always says "Halevah!"

No, my young friend, this business of antisemitism is not quite as easy as all that. He will find that out before he is very much older. You must fight it. If we are thinking of the future, we must fight it intelligently. We must fight all the reactionary systems which exploit antisemitism, which propagandize antisemitism.

I should like to give this writer and similar Jews who entertain such thoughts from time to time some advice if they will take it. In the first place, such discussions do not belong in the secular press. If you want to discuss a problem with Jews, discuss it in the Jewish press, at a Jewish gathering, in a Jewish synagog. If you feel that your borther or your close neighbor is guilty, the thing to do is to go to him and tell him and not to shout it from the housetops. Nothing is to be gained by printing such an article and putting it before the eyes of the non-Jew. This merely puts weapons in their hands.

I should like to send this writer to a good psychoanalyst. Furthermore, I would like to advise him and others who are like him that if all this were true, this is not the time to say it. The prophets of Israel always castigated their people when they were prosperous, affluent. They didn't want their people to fall into the cesspools of iniquity. But when their people were really broken, when their people lay broken and bleeding, the prophets came to them with messages of comfort and courage. In 1937, when the Jewish people is passing through one of the most desperate and tragic periods in its long history, when tens of thousands of people are exiled, driven out by hate, when the Jewish people needs inspiration moral uplifting, a young Jew dares to come out with this kind of denunciation, of our people. Really the Jewish people is pretty well tired of this type of curtain lecture from young Jews who are untutored and uninformed on the subject.

I close with the reading of a letter which was brought to my attention yesterday which was written by a German refugee and sent to the managing editor of the Reader's Digest in which magazine appeared an abstract of the article about which I commented this morning. This is the letter:

"Sir:

I came into this country from Germany some months ago after having faced there something that can be called a "Jewish problem". Reading Mr. Feuerlicht's article in the October issue of Reader's Digest, I am surprised to learn that this "Jewish problem" apparently only exists in Jewish imagination as a "martyr complex". Earnestly, I feel sorry that an article like this was written by a Jew. I don't think that a member

of the Jewish community has the right to belittle the martyr life and the martyr end of innumerable Jews throughout the centuries up to the present time.

"Perhaps the author, who met a Jewish problem until now only in quotation marks, has had exceptionally favorable experiences throughout his life. Others were not as lucky: A Jewish family came over from Europe, wanting to start a new life in an unprejudiced country, away from the atmosphere they had previously known. They tried to rent an apartment and were told that only gentiles were taken as tenants; their little girl played with another girl on the street; because she did not want to give her playmate a new toy, the other child called her a name only too familiar to her from Europe. As those people felt something like an eternally pursuing Jewish fate, they will be glad to be taught by Mr. Feuerlicht that they are only suffering from a pathological "martyr complex".

Mr. Feuerlicht's article can claim a certain originality in blaming the Jews for the invention of antisemitism, by calling the attention of gentiles to the existence of a Jewish group; otherwise, they would not have noticed it. That which is clear even to unbiased gentiles - that Jews in self-defense are entitled to point out that they have contributed somewhat to human culture and progress, from the Decalogue to Einstein's theory - this seems to be problematical to Mr. Feuerlicht.

"All over the world Jews are trying to analyze the reason of the fact of their martyr way throughout history. In the Zionist movement, the best elements of the Jewish nation try to normalize the status of the Jews all over the world by building up a Jewish national home, in this way to eliminate the homelessness of the Jewish people. Thousands

devote their lives to this task; even more contribute ideologically and financially. We already have martyrs even in Palestine. May their spiritual heritage succeed in overcoming all "complexes" and in bringing about a general understanding of the real structure of the "Jewish problem", so that there may come a time when the Jewish people need not be martyrs any more."

To which the editor replies:

"You will be interested to know that we have received a few letters from other readers whose reactions to Mr. Feuerlicht's article were much the same as yours, if not quite so cogently expressed.

"Our attitude in publishing the piece, of course, was simply that it was an interesting viewpoint, and put so as to stimulate the reader to work out his own thoughts on the subject.

"I'm glad you wrote me: and I certainly share your hope that the day may soon come when Jewish martyrdom will be a thing of reality to research historians only.

"Cordially yours".

Now this is the reaction of a normal non-Jew to the problem. The article itself is the reaction of an abnormal Jew to the Jewish problem.

To summarize, my friends, it were far better if we Jews and our friendly non-Jewish friends would stop taking the Jews every Monday and Thursday into the anatomical theatre. We are sick of it. Everything that can be helpfully said on the subject has already been said. It were far better for sons of rabbis, or Jewish people generally to devote themselves to the task of upbuilding Jewish life in the community - its religious idealism, its history. It were far better to devote themselves

to these constructive tasks in these critical times than to probe a problem which happens to be beyond their immediate solution, concerning which many of them do not even take the trouble to familiarize themselves adequately. This is a time for builders. This is the time for patient, quiet and determined labor in behalf of the basic rights of humanity. This is not the time for easy-going, off-hand charges and abuses. Loyalty and self-respect - that is what I would recommend to Jews and particularly to young Jews. Loyalty and above all, self-respect.



1. "Where the Jews Fail"

From early childhood - aware - was I - In his home - diff. from
them the years - 2 unfortunate facts - do not act like a normal p.
"Nobody can make honest effort to probe secret of J. diff. but his
head figuratively roll in the sand."

J. hyper-sensitive - Gentiles cannot discuss - prefer "Renegade"

He, however, not afraid - Will say - forestall - does not desire
to avoid being a J. - Son of Rabbi - It is clear:

has not intimate convictions - activities - contacts - enough
to it - Some of worst mischief makers - not only prefer -
malicious

Character moves

well intentioned - Heine =

"Truly he deserved to go to Heaven for it -
and there he thrashed every day with rods"

2 - It is, of course, not true J. resent honest effort -
In recent years - Hugo Valentin - Count Coudenhove-Kalergi
received - never heard of them

As for J. - Subject constantly discussed - Library
F. Bernstein - Arnold Zweg - Self vindication

From Prophets - with body -

No one cried "Renegade" - provided with sincere -
approach scientific - Information, ad quod

It is unfathomable scribbles - fly off handle - talks through
handles glitches, brayer dogmatism - swat about aphasia
Time too serious - uninformed amateurs in field -
authorities on J. psyche - philos. of J. exp - cloak
factual ignorance - catch words

3/ And so our writer proceed to probe "secret" Simple
Everything in home - school - tended to remind him - diff

① 221 m - 'Children, Martyr Raci' - divided - basic
element of his mental tenet. ly

Almost first was he understood - "different people" "merely"
"prejudice", "persecution"

Paranoid - Paranoid - aware of persecution

Sunday school - propaganda - Sp. Inquisition - shells - badge
"Protocols" - "first-class case of mild paranoia"

Did not learn a great deal about Rel. principle of J. -

That, unfortunately,

An intelligent J. educator - shows beauty - wholly
all the party - expected to fill - admission - happen

The dark chapters

When J. father - mother - children - luxurious -

"Rock of Ages, let our song praise Thy saving power" (Jents)

This complaint is - past too much with us
We interpret events of our daily life in terms of particular things
We have a persecution complex - abnormal in dealing

But what of present list of our people?

How are we to interpret events of our daily life in this

What is happening to-day - not 2000 -

Is it from Sunday School? Ger. - Poland - Moscow

It would be easy enough to forget part of
∴ We are today part to draw from it comfort for ourselves

It is when he passes from responsibility - 1/2 further - particulars - join hands

If a J. fails to get a job - make a club - rent a house

Recruits from personal experience - pupil tenured

- Jah. - parents "astorishing charge" make a team
fraternity - offer -

"Dirty-finger nails under Jewish nose" chewing

- the murder - not answer syst. discern. in industry

D. H. H. H. - competition - H. H. H. H. "Chr. only"

"Man hasste die Juden nicht weil sie es verdienen
nur weil sie verdienen" - hiding Bismarck

Persepolis schools - fraternities

= He is naïve enough - deluded - subtle - practiced against

{ "lot of dirty, greasy, unworth, unmanly, lazy, spoiled
"youngsters who can barely carry a crisp on the shoulder"

"White f"

all along worst delusion - wealthier - few decades start
In Germany - but when young - A hate, well-known,

5/ Hypocrites - "Merchant of Venice" - "total ignorance
of play" - one elegant speech - atones

our protest - "an attempt to stop honest that Explain
Such is the crisp - whereas - good - unmoral"

6/ Oh - he knows - Let's forget about it - Can't do -

"Remember" an relation - reasonable human being

Cease looking at them accusing eyes

"Let us return from Waiting hall to the wound path of life"

No, dear friend, not so easy - Fight! "Reaction"

"Minorities" (Just)

7/ his, dear friend, it is not as easy as all that. There is fighting
to be done - against those forces which feed on it - which
suck it - which exploit it - reaction - and J. Cleanfuge-
wall - good - manner - has nothing to do with it -
the modern - problem - which can only be solved in a world
which has learned to be tolerant, unimpaired (p. 18)

8/ Advice -

① Such discussions - are better not spread in similar press -
Tamil matters - addressed to Jews - Jewish press - what
earthly good can such an article read by Gentiles do the
Jews? will be seized upon by all objects for J. discussion -
② Honest criticism, intended to help an individual, and
not directed from the horse-tops - but directed to the ^{world} ^{individual}
individual - himself - Self-respect ^{is} ^{corner-stone} ^{of} ^{all} ^{gentile}
- ^{not} ^{at} ^{all} ^{times} ^{it} ^{is} ^{not} ^{self-respect} ^{to} ^{be} ^{made} ^{of} ^{people} ⁱⁿ ^{public}, ^{to} ^{be} ^{the} ^{gentile}
③ Jew does not wish to be talked with another. That's
why Monday Thursday - to be described - Everything there can
helpfully be read on the subject but then read - There is no
point in your, Hobbs working with fruit to the the,
have made your new discovery -

③ If you have any new ideas how Hobbs can be made to
stop here - you are for - & the evidence in Poland - we will be glad
to consider it - but certain - lectures from any Jew unprompted
in unbuttoned & unprompted - ^{can only be} ^{regarded} ^{as} ^{unimportant} ^{and}
odd.

of. Our good wish (quote).

He, too, should talk it to heart - Let him, first learn & then
lead Judaism - Let him discover the "Jewish" content
of J. life - & he will lose his "Jew-complex"

7/. Advice

- (1) Such discussion - J. Press - Nothing to be gained -
Help your neighbor - shout - house tops
- (2) Self-respect corner stone of all virtues
If it is not self-respect - heretic - Self-hate - Morbid
masochism
- (3) Now is this the time - Prophecy
- (4) Now - anatomical theatre - Everything - helpfully he
said - new new idea - stop Hitler

Curtain - lectures from young J - untubercled -
superstition - Jews have a word for it - 225111

8/. Just letters

Reader's Digest
Pleasantville, N.Y.

October 1, 1937

Dear Mr. Freudenthal:

You will be interested to know that we have received a few letters from other readers whose reactions to Mr. Feuerlicht's article were much the same as yours, if not quite so cogently expressed.

Our attitude in publishing the piece, of course, was simply that it was an interesting viewpoint, and put so as to stimulate the reader to work out his own thoughts on the subject.

I'm glad you wrote me: and I certainly share your hope that the day may soon come when Jewish martyrdom will be a thing of reality to research historians only.

Cordially yours,

Kenneth M. Payne

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Cleveland, Ohio