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Are you Religious? Are you a Jew?, 1950.

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ARE YOU RELIGIOUS - ARE YOU A JEW?

Sunday, April 16, 1950

Recently, dear friends, there appeared an interesting article on the subject, "The Post-War Revival of the Synagogue", written by Will Herbert in the Commentary magazine in which the author, after noting a definite revival in the synagogue, asks the pertinent question, whether that revival really reflects a religious re-awakening, and he is not at all sure that it does. He writes:

There is a religious revival under way among American Jews today. On this fact all informed persons whom I had the opportunity of consulting in recent months seem to be agreed, although each hastens to qualify and interpret the situation in a somewhat different way. The outward signs are obvious enough. Hundreds of synagogues and religious educational institutions are engaged in building-expansion programs; one exceptionally well informed source put the figure close to a thousand. Synagogue membership is probably at a record level. Many synagogues, indeed, have been compelled to close their books and establish waiting lists, while others have set up subsidiaries or have helped found entirely new institutions to take care of the overflow. Attendance is also markedly on the increase, not only during the High Holidays, but even at the regular Friday night or Saturday morning services. Hebrew and religious schools, particularly day schools, are making notable gains. As for high education, the Jewish Theological Seminary reported the largest freshman class in its history last year. Both the Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion and the Yeshiva University, the other two leading seminaries, are extending their scope and activities, and scores of small yeshivas of varying pretensions have sprung up in the larger Jewish centers.

Not only have synagogue affiliation and attendance been growing, but, according to my informants, the members of the congregations - even of the Orthodox - are no longer primarily older people and immigrants. On the contrary, they are in good part American born and bred, young men and women in their twenties and thirties, with a sizable proportion of youngsters in their teens. Veterans have in many instances been active in initiating and in building synagogues, and there is hardly a new housing project in any of the larger cities without its congregation. Reaching to some extent even beyond the circle of synagogue affiliation, the practice of certain Jewish observances in the home has been growing - particularly the blessing over the candles and the "kiddush" on the Sabbath eve and the fixing of the "mezuzah" to the doorpost. This is the general picture, and although not all my informants would agree on every details, it fairly well represents the consensus of experts.

The reasons which the author attributes to this revival of the synagogue and this large increase in building expansion are first, the fact that our country gener-

ally is enjoying a period of prosperity, that many synagogues and temples as well as Christian churches, are seizing the opportunity to get done what had long needed doing during the years of the war when building could not be carried on. This is as far as building physical structures is concerned.

As far as the revival of spiritual interest among Jews, he attributes it to two facts which I think valid; first, the fact of the collapse of the whole assimilationist philosophy for which Hitlerism was responsible, the realization that Jews are Jews and will remain Jews, and that there is no dignified withdrawal from the Jewish community and no undignified escapism possible in the modern world; and secondly, the establishment of the State of Israel and the great surge of pride which has come with it, and the elevation of the spirit of our people which is reflected in a proud self-consciousness which is seeking identification with the Jewish community. And the realization, furthermore, as a corollary to that, that such self-identification with the Jewish community in the United States can be only by belonging to the synagogue. There has also come the realization that the continuation of the Jewish group in the United States and in the Diaspora generally, which is now accepted and to which people have either eagerly or reluctantly reconciled themselves - the continuation of the Jewish group is possible only through the Jewish religion. It is the only force that can make for Jewish survival. So that even those who are religiously indifferent and skeptical are ready to associate themselves with a synagogue, give their children a Jewish education and perhaps even adopt certain of the traditional ritual observances in their homes. Religion is a good thing, they have come to understand and so, ought to be encouraged.

What raises doubts in the mind of the author, and the question whether this revival is truly indicative of a religious awakening among our people are some of the following facts. First, that with all the gains, with all of its gains, the synagogue still represents a minority of American Jews. Out of the 5,000,000 Jews in the United States, perhaps no more than a million and a half are affiliated with the synagogues, less than a third, which is probably a better record than in the Christian community.

But still an unsatisfactory record. And hardly 20% of American Jews attend religious services at least once a month. Most Jews are what you might call the "rush season Jews" around the High Holidays. And even those who do belong to a synagogue do not as a rule find it the center of their interest as men and as Jews, as it was generations ago. Other concerns seem to be central in their lives - philanthropy, social service and anti-defamation work and Zionism or labor unionism. They seem closer and more deeply related to the immediacies of their life and the core of their personal emotions. Religion is, in fact, often regarded as a kind of leisure-time, supplemental activity, and the synagogue is something you belong to because you happen to be a Jew. ✓

Now, this, the author maintains, is a sharp break with the past Jewish tradition when the synagogue was at the heart of Jewish life. What we are witnessing today is the secularization of Jewish institutions and activities, while we continue to insist that we are nothing more than a religious community, and while we are all persuaded that religion alone can insure our survival on the American scene, we nevertheless act as if the religious factor in our lives were peripheral, were secondary, supplemental, that the other interests are the dominant and the important ones.

And so, the author writes:

There are those who think that they can rebuild the Jewish community by shifting its base from religion to some secular concern - Zionism, "national culture", and the like - on the ground that the modern Jew is incorrigibly secular-minded. But such programs are bound to prove vain and delusive. It is difficult to see how any merely secular Jewish community can in the long run prove viable, in the modern world any more than in earlier times. Collective Jewish existence has always been and is, by its very nature, essentially and inherently religious. Saadya (the Jewish philosopher of the 9th century) said the last word on the subject when he stated: "Our people are a people only by virtue of its Torah." It can be taken as a conclusion warranted by all history and experience that if the Jewish people is to survive in the modern world, above all in America, it can only do so as a religious community, and that means a community in which the synagogue as a "religious" institution is restored to central place.

And finally the author maintains that not only is the synagogue being relegated to the periphery of Jewish life, but it is itself undergoing a certain inner decay,

its own kind of secularization. It is becoming an institution in which religion is no longer indispensable. Many a synagogue has become so completely secularized that it is neither a center for teaching, study and worship, nor a community of believers, but simply a large institution entangled in a multiplicity of external activities without religious content or meaning.

And the author maintained, therefore, that "the reconstitution of the synagogue into a force capable of playing in our time the same central role it played in the best periods of Jewish history demands a return to religious essentials".

Now, in this article the author has touched upon many vital matters and many sore spots, many weak spots in the spiritual composition of the American Jewish community. Take this matter, to begin with the last item - the secularization of the synagogue itself. There is much to be said on that subject. Twenty years ago here in our Temple we tried to face that problem frankly and realistically. We made a survey in those years of the work of The Temple in relation to the ultimate objectives, and our Board and our congregation came to the conclusion that many of the activities in which we were then engaged might well be abandoned, either because other agencies in the community were already doing it or because they were not contributing directly to the effective functioning of the Temple as a religious institution. You will remember that our Temple was the first in the United States to establish what has come to be known as the Temple Centers, the open temple, and many secular activities, many recreational activities were introduced into the Temple in order to make it, so to speak, the center of the life of the Jewish community. For quite a number of years The Temple carried on a large-scale program along those lines. But with the passing of the years, other agencies in the community, cultural, educational, recreational, took over many of these activities, which were essentially non-religious and non-Jewish in character, so that it was felt that The Temple was really doing no more than duplicating perhaps less effectively what was already being done by specialized groups in these fields in the community. And furthermore, it was discovered that these so-called secular activities

and recreational activities really did not accomplish the purpose, or one of the purposes for which they were intended - namely, to attract the youth to the Temple as a religious institution. And so, in 1929, The Temple adopted what came to be known in the United States as The New Temple Policy, namely that all "activities of a purely secular and recreational nature, which are aimed at entertaining people and attracting them to The Temple with the bait of amusement and which contribute little or nothing to their spiritual life, would be discontinued." "We hope," we stated in that program, "to serve our people not less but more in those reaches of human life where a religious institution can best serve in fulfillment of its historic function and essential genius. The Temple cannot be all things to all men, but it can be and should be a place of inspiring worship, of religious education, of ethical guidance, and of Jewish sanctity to all members of the Jewish community."

"We must gauge our influence not by the noise and bustle of multifarious and largely unfruitful activities which may be carried on within the Temple precincts, but by the readiness of men and women to turn to the Temple for the things of the spirit and by their eagerness to share in the larger life of Jewish responsibilities and human idealism."

Now, in this new program our Temple has not succeeded entirely. There has been through the years too much pressure from too many directions, and the auxiliary groups of The Temple do not always plan their programs with an eye to these central, unique purposes of The Temple; namely, religion and education. Quite a number of our programs differ not one whit from the programs of the purely social and secular organizations in our community. And under the beguiling slogan of creating good fellowship and attracting people, we have been tempted, I am afraid, all too often to overload our Temple activities with dances and dinners and entertainments which contribute, when all is said and done, very little to religious inspiration or cultural enrichment. And with quite a number of our people, these - the dances and the dinners and the entertainments - come to take the place of worship and of Temple attendance.

To be sure, The Temple - our Temple, any Temple - is for fellowship, and the element of sociability should not be ignored, but a synagogue is not a social club. ✓
Some people really think that the Temple should not only be a social club, but an exclusive club, forgetting that purpose of a church and a temple and a synagogue - to make men aware of their common humanity, rich and poor alike, young and old, for we are all sinners; we all stand in need of repentance. The synagogue is a House of God and a place of religious study. It should not be difficult to draw the line if we keep in mind always what a synagogue is and what its work in the community really is. The synagogue is commissioned by history to do what no other agencies in the community are obligated to do, to give spiritual guidance, to give ethical inspiration, to give education to young and old in the tenets and practices of Judaism, in the life, history and culture of the Jewish people, and to be a sanctuary for prayer and worship. The synagogue should arouse a hunger for these things, and then try to satisfy that hunger.

I think in the years to come, after the American Jewish community settles down, it will come to understand these simple truisms and the synagogue will adjust itself, happily and contentedly, to its specific role in the life of the Jewish community, which is a central role. ✓

The writer's criticism that many synagogue affiliations are purely formal, a matter purely of belonging, so to speak, or paying membership dues but not involving any great spiritual commitments - that is also true. The more the pity! Because being a member in a synagogue is quite a different thing than being a member, say, in a society to maintain an orphanage or a home for the aged or any other philanthropic institution. Those institutions we support for others less fortunate whom we wish to help. A synagogue we create and maintain for ourselves, and unless we use it, it cannot reach us, it cannot serve us. We have to be receptive vessels for this ichor, this ethereal fluid of inspiration which a religious institution can give. ✓

It is quite fantastic to say, "I love music, but I never go to a symphony, I never go to an opera, I never listen to music, but I love music." I for one am not intolerant of such Jews who have only a checkbook relationship to the synagogue and not a prayer book relationship. I am not intolerant of them. I don't judge them harshly, and certainly do not read any Jew out of the fold unless he himself wishes to read himself out. "A Jew even if he sins is a Jew." And of course, there is always the opportunity of a Jew becoming a "baal ^{te}shuvah", of repenting and starting over again. And a Jew's very affiliation with a synagogue is still evidence of an allegiance, of a continuing even if of a vague loyalty to the central institution of the Jewish faith. So I say I do not quarrel with those people, and I am not intolerant of them, but rather, I am sorry that these people miss in their lives the strength and the beauty which the message of the synagogue, the oldest religious institution of mankind, can bring to them - the uplift, the deepening and the enrichment of their lives, which can come to them through active participation, not merely belonging but participating fully, enthusiastically in the life of the synagogue - in public worship and in its educational program.

The author is equally correct, I believe, in his criticism that ^{with} many affiliated Jews the synagogue is not the center of their interest. The center of their interest in the Jewish community is philanthropy, relief, local relief, moral relief, defense work, Zionism - these take precedence - and in many instances, to the high total eclipse of their interest in the synagogue. I know many Jews in this community and throughout the United States - for this community is no different from other communities in America - I know many Jews, good Jews, fine Jews, who are leaders in federations of Jewish charities, in welfare federations, in welfare campaigns, women who are very active in federations of women's clubs, councils of Jewish women, Hadassah work, who seldom, if ever, come to the synagogue. Now these activities in which they are engaged are all very important, but they're ~~simply~~ not surrogate, they're ~~simply~~ not substitutes for worship, religion. They do not make for Jewish survival. They will

all perish with the disappearance of the synagogue and the Jewish school. Many of the leaders of our Jewish philanthropies, locally and nationally, have very little concern with the problem of Jewish education and the Jewish training of the rising generation. Their interest seems to diminish as they pass from philanthropy to the synagogue, to the school. And yet, it is an iron law of Jewish history - and our history is long and one can deduce certain basic laws which operate in our history - it is an iron law of Jewish history that no single Jewish community has ever survived which built itself exclusively upon philanthropy and charity, upon orphanages, upon hospitals, or even upon the synagogue. Only those communities survived which laid the emphasis upon synagogue and Jewish learning and the school. It will be no different in the United States. And Jewish leaders ought to come to understand that fact. You cannot make for Jewish survival simply by catering to the sick Jews or the old Jews or the orphan Jews. You have to cater to the Jewish people as a whole, to its mind and its soul and its spirit. You do that through a school! You do that through the cultivation of Jewish learning, to the support of Jewish academies, to the spread of the Jewish book, and through making the synagogue and all that it stands for vital, central and vibrant in the life of the Jewish community.

Now, this isn't salesmanship, good friends. These are the facts of history. When a Jew says to me - frequently Jews do talk to me - when a Jew says to me, "I am a Jew by religion only," and you know the kind of Jews that usually say that, when a Jew says to me, "I am a Jew by religion only," I am prepared to accept his definition because there really is no one definition of Jewish life that has received the official stamp of approval - I am prepared to accept his definition, but I ask of him a bill of particulars. In what way are you a Jew by religion? Do you belong to a synagogue? Do you attend the synagogue? Do you join with your fellow Jews in regular religious worship? That is part of being a religious Jew - a Jew by religion. I know of no Judaism without public worship. Ancient, medieval, modern - I simply don't know of any type of Judaism without worship. Do you observe Jewish holidays in your

home, in the synagogue, and their beautiful historic customs which are, after all, the instruments for conveying the spiritual message of religion, just as wood and brass and strings are the physical instruments for making music audible and conveying its spiritual message. Do you observe them? Do you practice them? I know of no Judaism - I know of no Jewish religion - orthodox, conservative, or reform -- that is without them.

Do you give your children a good Jewish education, to make them know, love and appreciate the values of our faith, of our culture? Do you yourself keep yourself informed, educated in matters Jewish. Do you support institutions and academies of Jewish learning and scholarship? I don't know of any Judaism without Torah, without learning. There is no such thing. The duty of learning and teaching was not only one of the fundamental duties of Jewish religious life - it was the central "Mitzvah" of Judaism.

But when to all these questions which I put to this friend of mine, who talks to me about Judaism, when to all these questions he can only reply that he pays dues to a Temple or that he contributes to charity, I tell him, "Brother, we are not talking of the same thing at all, and you know it." That kind of a religion is certainly not the religion of the Psalmist who said, "Better a day in Thy courts than a thousand elsewhere. How lovely are Thy dwelling places, O Lord of Hosts." That kind of a religion - empty, abstract, starved, emaciated - is certainly not the religion of the Prophets who said, "Call unto Me and pray unto Me, and I will answer you. Seek Me and you will find Me. When you seek Me with all your heart." It is certainly not the religion of Jewish law which said, "Thou shalt meditate therein day and night." It is certainly not the religion of the Rabbis, who said, "The study of the Torah and Jewish learning is above all other meritorious deeds and commandments."

Well, are you religious? Are you a Jew? These are the criteria. To be a Jew, my dear friends, involves great commitments. Judaism is an easy religion, and yet, a very difficult religion. The Bible, "This commandment which I command thee this day, is not in the heavens that you need to say, who will go up to heaven and bring it down to us; it is not beyond the seas that you need to say, who will go for us beyond the seas and bring it to us." "The thing is very near unto you." You can do it if you want to. It's near; it's accessible. It's not a religion of extremism; it doesn't call for ascetism; it doesn't call for terrific self-denial; it's not a religion for angels, for monks, for anchorites - it's for human beings! In that sense it's an easy religion, livable and practical. But it's also quite a difficult religion.

There are theosophies in the world which offer men a minimum of religious discipline and a maximum of peace of mind. Judaism doesn't do it. Judaism always spoke of religion as "the burden of the Kingdom of God". It's the sort of a burden that lifts all other burdens from the human soul; it makes a man truly free; it emancipates one. For the greatest adventure of all is the spiritual adventure.

Judaism has been defined time and again by our sages. It is not merely the doing of justice and the loving of mercy; it is not merely a matter of ethics. It is also that of walking humbly with God. Religion is a matter of piety, also - of deep devotion to God, and the seeking of God. One of the classic ways of seeking God is to worship.

An ethical system, my dear friends, is not yet a religion. Our religion begins with God. "In the beginning God created." Our ten commandments ^{begin} with God. "I am the Lord, Thy God." A Judaism without the consciousness of the presence of God in our lives and all the spiritual commitments that fact brings with it is no Judaism. When the Prophet Jonah was asked, before he was cast into the sea, who he was, he said, "I am a Hebrew, and I worship the God, the Creator of Heaven." That's a Hebrew. He worshipped the God who created the universe.

To be a Jew means to have a sense of the covenant in one's life and a sense of the mission in Jewish life. We were designated as a kingdom of priests. A priest is no priest who never attends to the altars of his sanctuary. We were to be examples of religion, leaders in religion for mankind. To be a Jew is "to learn, to teach"; not merely "to keep the commandments and to do them" but to learn and to teach, increasing yourself spiritually, augmenting the domains of your soul and transmitting to your children all the accumulated experience and knowledge and insights of your forebears. That's Judaism. A secularist Jew - a secularist Jew is a sort of vestigial Jew. He's a hang-over. He has survived because of his Jewish ancestors, but he makes no contribution to the survival of the faith of his people. And there are all too many secularist Jews in Jewish community life who wish to be leaders in Jewish community life, who set the tone in Jewish community life and direct our institutions which the Jewish community builds and maintains. I don't envy them the job, but they are not good examples of this totality of Jewishness which alone will make, not merely for our survival, but for a real dynamic and creative role which the Jewish community can play in the years to come in this gracious land of ours.

And so, my good friends, living as we do today in what is definitely a transition period, living at the time when the establishment of the Jewish State has forced the necessity for new orientation and new definition on the part of every Jew living outside of Israel, this is a good time for Jews individually and Jews collectively to ask themselves, are we religious? Are we really Jews? What does it mean in terms of 1950 to be religious and to be Jewish on the American scene?

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Sunday, April 16th, 1950

"Annual Alumni Service"

10:30 a. m.

IN THE TEMPLE

RABBI SILVER
will preach

★ ★

*Members of the Alumni will participate in the Service
and will serve as ushers. Make this a family service—
joined together in worship.*



"Stump the Experts"

8:00 p. m.

IN MAHLER HALL

PANEL:

RABBI NODEL
RABBI STONE

and

Representing the Alumni Study Groups
Judy Terr Lenore Steinberg
Dick Wengel Mannford Mann
Roger Bercu—Moderator

PRIZES TO THE "STUMPERS"

Information

You'll get it

Dancing

Members and dates—free

Please

Don't miss it

Refreshments

Non-members—50c



“Double Feature Day”

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