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The American Jewish Community, 1950.

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THE AMERICAN JEWISH COMMUNITY - ITS FUTURE

November 12, 1950

In this series of addresses which I am delivering at our Services this month on Modern Jewish Life and Thought, you will recall that I discussed last Sunday morning, The State of Israel - Its Problems. This morning I shall think through with you the subject, The Jewish Community of the United States - Its Future.

The Jewish community is very old - perhaps the most ancient community in the world. It were perhaps more accurate to speak of Jewish communities in the plural because in the last 2700-2800 years there have been more than one Jewish community in the world. Simultaneously there existed a Jewish community in Palestine and Jewish communities outside. And for many centuries the Jewish communities outside outnumbered the Jewish community within Palestine. So that the recent, the most recent phenomenon of having one important Jewish community centered in Palestine possessed of political independence and many Jewish communities outside of Palestine throughout the world is not at all a new phenomenon in Jewish experience. These communities possessed through the ages a wide variety of organizational forms. There was no one pattern which embraced them all. What was constant in all these communities everywhere and at all times, whether in Palestine or in Babylon or in the Graeco-Roman world or in the Moslem world or the Christian world - what was constant in these communities was first of all a strong will to live - to live as Jews, and secondly, a strong will to perpetuate and to transmit their faith.

There was never a time in Jewish history when the concepts of faith and people were dissociated. It is difficult, of course, to determine which of the two concepts, religion or people, was stronger at every period, the ethnic or the religious. In the Midrash we read that the prophet Elijah was once approached by a Jew and asked, which comes first - the Torah or Israel. And the prophet Elijah replied, Israel comes first. And I am sure that other quotations can be found in our great rabbinic literature which would put the emphasis on Torah - give it the priority. But the question of priority

is really not at all important. What is important is that both of these concepts were looked upon as important, and both of them through out our history/^{were} intertwined, inseparably tied together. Even when the Jewish people was at home in Palestine in ancient and classical times and possessed of the full equipment of statehood, the genius of the Jewish people as it was expressed through prophets and spiritual leaders violently opposed the idea that the Jewish people should be only just like all other peoples. They wanted the Jewish people to be like all other peoples insofar as they possessed a normal status of national existence, a land, government of their own, sovereignty, a language, a culture, but they were not satisfied that the Jewish people should be only just like all other peoples. They wanted the Jewish people to be something more something over and above. They wanted the Jewish people to be conscious of a higher destiny in terms not of being greater than other peoples in territorial acquisition and imperial conquests and wealth, power, national glory - no, they weren't thinking of those terms at all. They wanted the Jewish people to be more than a political unit so that it may be a people of spiritual leadership in mankind - and their capital, Zion, would be not a place from which political dictates would go forth to a subjugated world, but from which the light of the Lord would stream forth, spiritual guidance and ethical inspiration.

Now, there are today and there have always been, I assume, in Jewish life certain Jewish people who wanted the Jewish people to be just like any other people and no more. And that became especially acceptable to substantial numbers of our people in the 19th and 20th centuries when secularism and nationalism made their headway throughout the world. There were people who sought to reconstruct/^{the} Jewish community into a sort of a secular nationality organization in which religion would occupy a tolerated position amongst numerous other cultural and social activities. There was Diaspora nationalism of the type evolved by Simon Dubnow and others which posited the existence of a Jewish people in the world as a secular nationalit possessed of constitutional guarantees which would insure it national status and self-government and educational facilities

and the right to employ its own language. And there was a time following the First World War when, as a result of certain specific provisions which were incorporated in the minority treaties at the Peace Conferences that this seemed possible, as far as Eastern Europe at least was concerned. But these minority rights soon ran into violent resistance on the part of governments and peoples and rapid nullification followed. Today, with the practical liquidation of East European Jewry, Diaspora nationalism remains a purely academic matter. Western European Jewry and American Jewish communities have never asked for it, they do not desire any special status as national minorities, the whole concept is alien to the structure of these democratic countries. Here Jews desire equal rights of citizenship and freedom from all forms of discrimination - no more, no less. So that when one thinks of the future of the American Jewish community, one, I believe, may think of it as a community which will continue on a purely voluntary basis of allegiance - no guaranteed minority rights, no quasi-governmental mandates, such as the French and Belgian Jewish Consistories which were organized by Napoleon possessed, which derive some authority from the state. Under our system of life there is a great jealousy about the separation of the Church and State.

The Jewish community of the United States is likely to develop, not along the lines of the patriarchate in ancient Palestine, which possessed extensive powers or the exilarchate of Babylon, whose head was a recognized officer of the state, or the highly centralized Kahals of the Jewish communities of Spain, which possessed comprehensive juridical and disciplinary powers, or like the medieval Jewish communities of Europe which, in every regard but the political, were a state within a state, or like the powerful diets of Polish or Lithuanian Jewries. I am inclined to believe that the American Jewish community will come to resemble what the Jewish communities of the Graeco-Roman Empire looked like - independent, democratic, free from all governmental direction with their own freely elected lay and spiritual leaders. The American Jewish community is likely to be loosely knit. It will not yield, I believe, to any efforts at over-centralization and excessive regimentation or control. Although

this community will evidence in the days to come as it has in the past a strong capacity for unity of action in times of emergency, such as we experienced during the wars in our efforts for the relief of our fellow brothers across the sea and in the building of the State of Israel and in civil defense work.

This community will be free to develop itself in the United States, and prosper, I believe, as long as these United States remain free, as long as America remains loyal to its basic traditions; as long as it remains tolerant and is free of chauvinism, the American Jewish community will be free to develop itself along the lines which I have indicated. And this community will be centered in Judaism or it will not survive. It is an ethnic religious community that it will carry on on the American scene. And that term, ethnic religious, or any other term that you would like to substitute for it containing the same idea, is broad enough to include all that we mean when we speak of the Jewish way of life - Jewish philanthropy, Jewish social service, Jewish culture - but it is not broad enough to give to these derivative activities of Jewish life - philanthropy, social service, culture - to give to them priority over the synagogue and over the religious school.

There is a great danger in this. Our concentration in the last generation, which was compulsory - which had to be - on philanthropy, on relief work, on campaign, on helping our brothers all over the world, and on building our own charitable institutions in this new world - our concentration on these tasks have persuaded many of our people, not only that these represent the essence and the totality of Judaism, but also that they are the true means of our survival, and that is a dangerous delusion. All these activities are necessary and commendable, but they are not the roots of Jewish life; they are not its nourishing strength. And Jewish life will wither and dry rot will set in unless the Jewish community of America sinks its roots deep down into the rich soil of Jewish faith and Jewish learning.

In this connection it should also be borne in mind that the state is steadily moving in on all fields of social and welfare services - social security - and the im-

portance of the private or the denominational agency in these fields will progressively diminish. There will remain little that is specifically Jewish in the field of organized Jewish social service. And likewise, these campaigns which in the last generation have kept our Jewish communities organized and alerted - these campaigns for relief, for self-defense, etc. - they cannot be counted indefinitely to keep Jewish life mobilized, vital and active. So that without a vital religion and a replenishing Jewish education and scholarship, I am afraid that the ^{American} Jewish community will linger on as a waning and decaying residuum of the past in a twilight zone of drift until some unforeseen storm breaks over it, attacks its weakened frame, and shatters it beyond repair.

The Jew survived in the Diaspora because he centered his life in the congregation, the religious school, the synagogue. And not only did he survive because of this fact - survival itself is no virtue, no great virtue, at least - he grew intellectually sturdy and spiritually and culturally creative in every country of the world where he fostered the congregation, the school, and Jewish scholarship. We ought to remember always that what the Jewish people possesses today of great cultural literary treasures are not exclusively of the creation of the Jews of Palestine, nor I believe of those of the future, will they be exclusively the creation of the Jews of Israel. We are not warranted by 3,000 years of Jewish experience to expect the contrary. Jews all over the world made monumental and enduring contributions to the totality of Jewish life, Jewish literature, Jewish culture. Nor should we converge all our hopes for the future of our people and our faith on one center alone. The Millennial drama of our people was enacted on more than one world stage. Some of the principal actors from Moses to Moses, through Moses Maimonides, through Moses Mendelssohn, across the whole sweep of our history - some of the principal actors never lived in Palestine.

Centers of Jewish life shift, have shifted in the past to Palestine, to Babylon, to Spain, to Western Europe, to Eastern Europe, to the Western hemisphere. Today there are two important centers of Jewish life in the world - Israel and the United States.

Of Israel I spoke to you last week - of Israel and its problems. The Jewry of the United States owes it to itself and to history to carry on the historic work of Judaism. And in this connection we ought to bear in mind that from here on we must find resources for Jewish work within ourselves. We must now begin to prepare our own victuals. We can no longer borrow from the old world; the old world no longer exists as a provisioning center for the spiritual and cultural life of American Jewry.

Fortunately, we are not unprepared for this historic task which destiny has now assigned to the Jewish community of America. It is a well organized community - perhaps a little too over-organized, but it is not a scattered and broken community. It has a good quota, if not an adequate quota of necessary institutions for good work and for survival - synagogues and schools and seminaries, social agencies - and it does possess a sense of responsibility which manifests itself most gratifyingly in times of crisis, tension. In the last generation, when the household of Israel became one vast hostelry of pain and the old Jewish communities were razed to the ground and the appeal came to our fellow Jews here in the United States to save, heal, help, we were not found wanting, may it be said to the credit of this generation of American Jews. We responded as a sound, healthy organism. In other words, there is good building material in this American Jewish community for the future. But there are a few things we have to watch. And these are the thoughts that I want to share with you this morning.

If my thesis is correct that it is the synagogue and the school that will be pre-eminently responsible for Jewish survival in the United States, or for that matter, in any other part of the world, then ~~then~~ the synagogue and the school must re-orient themselves. Religious education must become a far more serious business to us than it has been heretofore. It must become far more extensive and far more intensive. Our Sunday Schools are simply not preparing our children for the kind of thing we are talking about, for the kind of a Jewish community we have in mind.

And in this connection I should like to point out that history - and we must go to history to learn of the past in order that we think through our problems intelligently for the future - our history points conclusively to the fact that no Jewish community ever survived long, and no Jewish community ever made any important contributions to Jewish life which did not foster the Hebrew language and the Hebrew culture. This is an ineluctable fact of our experience. The Jewish people cannot survive without Jewish learning. We have armor against everything except ignorance. The Jewish people in the past used other languages - Aramaic, Greek, Arabic, modern languages in large numbers - for their religious and cultural expressions, principally for technical scholarship, philosophy, but the language of prayer and the language of poetry and of Jewish law, the deepest and most vital expressions of the people, was nearly always in the Hebrew language. One simply cannot conceive of the great creative periods and countries of the world of our people without reference to the deliberate and extensive cultivation of the Hebrew language and literature. Second only to the Torah itself, the language was a factor of survival among our people. And if we are thinking, as many of us are thinking, in terms of a possible strong cultural link in the days to come between the Jewry of Israel and the Jewries of the Diaspora, then it is language which will have to be the link between these communities. We must try to raise a generation of Jews that will be able to read and understand along with their native speech the historic language of the people of Israel.

But it's not easy - it never was easy. The preservation of Jewish life was never an easy task inside of Palestine or outside of Palestine. It was always a thing of struggle. And some American Jews are giving up the struggle. Some are giving it up out of indifference; some are giving it up out of pseudo-philosophy of integration. That's another word for what we used to call assimilation. It's another term for a rationale for a minimalist Judaism which is the rosy path to complete annihilation.

To sum up, dear friends, then my thinking about the Jewish community in the United States tomorrow - I have great hope for it. We have by the grace of God already reached the point where the Jewish community of the United States is the largest Jewish community in the whole history of our people. It's a good Jewish community. It lives in a goodly land of freedom where men have a right to live their own lives within the framework of a just and generous law of the land. The American Jewish community of tomorrow will, in the main, be what American Jews will make it. External pressure will be massive, but the internal motivations will be decisive. It should be remembered that always it was not compulsion for any historic dialectics which kept the Jewish group alive, but fierce and stiff-necked voluntary will.

If it is left to Jews who are Jews by fate only or by drift or Jews for an occasional beau geste - if these are to be our leaders tomorrow, they will permit it to run down in ignorance and apathy to slow exhaustion and disintegration. If leadership is held by Jews who experience the inner compulsion of covenant and vision, who wish Judaism and the Jewish people to carry on triumphantly in the world, who draw from the brave and noble remembrances of the past high and valiant hopes for the future of our spiritual commonwealth and who are prepared to do all that is necessary and advantageous to vitalize and perpetuate their faith in their communities, there is sure to emerge the adequate and suitable organizational forms of the agencies which the community will require for positive and creative living as well as the vital synagogue and the efficient school, especially the school. Forms will change; the lines, for example, separating orthodox, conservative and reform Judaism may grow indistinct in time and dissolve although it is not quite clear what gains will accrue to Judaism from physical merger and ritual uniformity; but given devoted and purposeful leadership and adequate religious educational agencies, we may look to the future of the American Jewish community, barring disastrous revolutionary changes of the structure of the American government and society - we may look with a good measure of confident hope.

It is, therefore, most gratifying that this week our community is privileged to welcome the Convention of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations and the National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods, whose leaders, I believe, I am confident, belong to that group of leadership to which I have just referred ~~p~~ men and women who would like to see the Jewish people and Judaism not only survive but carry on triumphantly the mandates and the mission of Jewish life in the world - men and women who live their people and their faith, and who would like to do what their forefathers have done throughout the ages - transmit unto the coming generations that marvelous treasure, those crowned jewels of the human spirit - the Jewish faith, the Jewish code of ethics, the Jewish way of life. Upon their deliberations and upon their work in our midst during the coming days, we invoke the blessing of the God of Israel - Shomer Yisrael - who slumbereth not nor sleepeth. Amen.

