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Facing the Jewish future, 1932.

Facing the Jewish Future

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Noted Rabbi Looks at the Havoc Wrought by the Present Crisis and Points the Way to Cope with Trying Days Ahead.

By RABBI ABBA HILLEL SILVER

THE Jewish people is not liquidating its Jewish life because of the depression. Our history has been one of continuous and aggressive building, or at least of determined conservation, in times of depression and even of persecution. We are not strangers to crisis. Over long stretches of our national experience the mood of crisis was the normal mood. Our people did not permit itself to be diverted from the necessary tasks of national preservation, by unfavorable conditions, by sudden loss of political status or by economic disasters. Emergencies only impelled it to greater and more sacrificial effort.

I was once asked whether I thought that Judaism would die in America. I answered, no! the banks won't let it die! We built so many of our institutions on borrowed money and mortgaged their future incomes. So that in this depression the leaders of these institutions must wear themselves out in heart-breaking efforts to meet budgets abnormally swollen by huge interest and amortization charges. The normal activities of these institutions have to be reduced to less than a minimum and the salaries of employees, directors, teachers, supervisors or Rabbis have to be slashed, in order to meet these fixed charges. Perhaps the depression will teach us to build more modestly in the future, not to stretch the curtains and lengthen the cords of our physical tents too far. Perhaps in the future we shall learn to invest more in essential qualitative purposes and programs of our institutions and less in brick and stone.

Days of depression are days of stock-taking, penitence and good resolutions. There is a great soul-searching going on among the thoughtful ones of our people. This augurs well for the future.

Many social workers are asking themselves just what is their real place in Jewish community life today. The specific Jewish character of many of their activities has been largely attenuated. Fund-raising for philanthropic purposes has in many cities become a joint civic enterprise in which Jews figure as citizens and not as Jews. There is a tendency to bring Jewish agencies, which are the beneficiaries of these joint funds, into a general city-wide scheme of operation and management.

CHANGED SOCIAL NEEDS

Organized charity, in general, is slowly but steadily moving from the realm of private philanthropy to that of state responsibility. Organized charity is a survival of an individualistic society which assumed little or no corporate responsibility for its handicapped. But a new type of society is now in the making. The social control which is surely coming over industry will embrace also our charitable institutions.

Jewish organized charity, by and large, will, I believe, not resist this process of socialization. Furthermore the practical stoppage of immigration and the steady disappearance of a large unadjusted Jewish immigrant group which required special group treatment are removing one of the most cogent reasons for our sepa-

ratist activities in the future. Whereas in the past the Jewish social worker found his professional mandate in caring for newly arrived Jewish immigrants, in adjusting them to the American scene, in bridging the gulf between the parents of the old world and their children of the new and in fostering numerous charitable activities the need for whose specific Jewish distinctiveness no one questioned, today the Jewish social worker must look for his professional mandate elsewhere.

In recent years he has begun to find it in a new philosophy of the American Jewish community. In this philosophy, the interests of the Jewish community itself as a living organism are paramount. Its preservation is the informing principle of all organized Jewish activity. Whatever private philanthropic agencies can be retained in our swiftly changing economic order, are to be retained only as they can be made to preserve, strengthen or enrich Jewish communal life. This is the position which any minority group, desirous of maintaining its identity in modern society and in the extremely assimilative environment of American democracy, must take. This is the position which the Catholic community has taken in this country, and which other religious and racial groups have taken.

The Jewish community is not the Jewish synagogue. It is quite as fantastic and foolish to think of the Jewish people of today as a religious communion as it is to think of the synagogue as a non-religious institution where a non-existent God is worshipped by an atheist Rabbi at the behest of a nationalism which has room neither for God nor worship.



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