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Are We Necessary?, 1968.

ARE WE NECESSARY?

Sunday, October 27, 1968

The Temple

Rabbi Daniel Jeremy Silver

Over the centuries our people have answered the question; Why am I? with a surprisingly sensible tautology; a Jew is a Jew, is a Jew. If we lived in Israel we might paraphrase it, Ayn b'era - there is no alternative, there is no live option. Of course, during the long centuries there was the road that led to the baptismal font but it was a dismal, unpleasant road; one which few walked with anticipation. Those, for whom religion was not their cup of tea, were not about to exclaim delightedly over another brew. Those who left the beleaguered minority left mainly because of greed or their desire for political or social advancement, not because other affirmations exerted an irresistible attraction. Moreover, once that journey had been taken the convert discovered that he had not passed over. The Jew become Christian was 'that Jew.' Indeed, Christendom institutionalized any number of ingenious structures like the Inquisition to test by trial the loyalty of the convert. What was true of Christendom was equally true of Islam. Muslim law declared recidivism, the return after conversion to one's birth faith, a capital crime. Many Jews who turned Muslim found themselves suddenly denounced by a bitter competitor or by an angry neighbor eager for revenge.

Over the centuries our people discovered that it was better not to linger for long on this question of identity. The best thing to do was to make a virtue out of necessity and to mine the rich treasures of Judaism, its high moral commands, its spiritual vision, the warmth and color of the holy days and holy things in order to bring the sanctity of Judaism into their lives - not to complain overmuch or beat their breast overlong, because there was no alternative. And, most Jews have discovered that by turning within, by plugging into the ancestral vision, they were able to sing with the Psalmist, Ashrenu, we are happy, Mah t'v helkenu, how goodly is our portion, mah naim goralenu, how pleasant is our inheritance.

Then, perhaps a hundred years ago, Jewish life emerged onto a new political and social plateau. The world seemed to become an open society. There was now a live option. The Jew who was disillusioned or status driven could join the growing legions of the religiously unaffiliated in the city, in the university, in the party; he could simply fade away and fade into a secular environment and no one would bother him with questions. There was no need for a formal act of renunciation. Father did not have to say kaddish for his apostate son. Mother need not worry that her Hymie had converted. She could go on believing that Hymie, became Herman, was of the faith, and Herman did not have to trouble his conscience about hypocrisy, about the making of empty vows; he had no vows to make. He simply moved off and disappeared from view.

There was another advantage now to those who wished to move out. Up to recent times those who left must have felt that they were deserters, that they were abandoning a faith, under fire; but now they were not pariahs, social outcasts; but pioneers. The new age breathed the spirit of secularism and of agnosticism. Many fashionable voices were saying; "give up the superstitions of the past; give up the faith of the medieval world. Be up to date. Modern man must be guided by science not medieval piety." And so, the man who wanted to walk away could wrap himself rather proudly in the mantle of contemporaneity. He need no longer slink aside or feel himself in limbo. He had a very real sense that he was where the action is.

The question forced itself: Why am I a Jew? Why do I retain the old affiliation? What does Judaism mean to me? If the answer was, it means very little, or it means nothing at all, he could turn aside and walk away. When one considers the minority position of our people and the social and political disabilities Jews faced it says something quite wonderful about the substance of our faith, that so few did walk aside, that so many responded loyally. What were the arguments which fathers offered their children and rabbis their classes and by which they tried to advance the claims of Judaism to allegiance in the new century?

In the first instance there were those who said: there are no claims to be advanced. There are still no viable alternatives. You delude yourself if you believe that you

live in an open society and that you can simply move away. A Jew is a Jew is a Jew. Why? Because anti-Semitism is anti-Semitism. "That which has been is, that which still is, is." Such speakers were able to marshal a great deal of evidence. There is in every American city a second or third generation descendent of rich Jewish pioneers who had converted way back then to Episcopalianism or some other status faith, to whom Society with a capital "S" points whenever they want to claim that the downtown club which they belong to is not restricted. Every community has its Walter Halle. From another quarter consider the radical left. These ideologies are propounded which are totally at variance with the traditions of our people. Judaism begins with community, with discipline and law; "separate not thyself from the community." The young people who belong to the radical left can have little interest in the traditional perspectives of our faith, and yet, how many college presidents and how many college deans comment on the large number of Jews in these radical student groups and assume that left and Jews are somehow synonymous. You can not put the label behind you. How many good Germans, good Aryans found that one of their grandmothers lit Shabbos candles and in so doing had lit the gas ovens for them. To be a member of the Communist Party you must affirm atheism and yet, in the Soviet Union today, members of the Communist Party who happen to be descended of Jewish parents still have stamped on their

identification cards the word "Jew." Further, despite the fact that the Soviet constitution of 1917 includes a paragraph which specifically proscribes anti-Semitism, it is generally impossible for those atheists who happen to have "Jew" stamped on their identification papers to rise above a middle rank in government, the sciences or academics.

Those who claim that we delude ourselves if we believe we live in an open society can marshal an impressive array of evidence. Certainly it is an act of kindness to disabuse the more naive among our young who would throw themselves on the bosom of the great open liberal world out there - - who want only to love and be loved that they may very well be spurned and rejected. When the Soviet tanks crashed into Czechoslovakia it was a Jew who was consular of State, and a Jew who was the Minister of Labor, who were the first sacrificial offerings upon the altar of reaction. In our own nation we see a disaffiliated Jew nominated to become the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court who is denied the assent of the Congress and the Senate. Why? In part certainly because there are still large segments in the American population which can not conceive of the Supreme Court being presided over by a Jew.

Whatever be our hopes we do not live in an open society. The reality is that our society is at least partially closed. But the walls which exist are not so high that some can not scale them. After all a Zik and others rose to high office in the Communist Party in Czechoslovakia and Fortas is a

Supreme Court justice in the United States. There are many in every city who have passed out of sight. No one recalls who they were or what they once were. There is some openness. Some do fade away.

And so, the question is still a live one. Why are you a Jew? What arguments, can I offer to my children, to my students, to my congregation, to my friends, to my neighbors when they wrestle with the question of religious identity? What does it mean to be a Jew? Why retain the ancestral loyalties and the disadvantages of a minority living? Why maintain any religious life in a secular age?

We are not the first generation to be faced with this problem. Over the years Jews have devised a number of justifications. Most of these fall under one heading which I would like to label 'the doctrine of the mission of Israel.' This argument takes this form: We must remain Jews because the world requires a Jewish presence. Why does the world require the Jew? Because we are the living symbols of the Ten Commandments, of Scripture and Prophecy. We stand for justice simply by being. By virtue of our Biblical history we stand in the world's eye for righteousness. We stand for God's word made manifest in life and imminent in society; demanding that men change their ways, repent of their greed, their violence, their privilege and manage a more adequately ordered society.

This doctrine of the mission of Israel is expressed in many ways and has many forms. Let me cite to you two

typical statements of it by two of the more famous rabbis of another generation, Emil G. Hirsch and Leo Baeck. Emil G. Hirsch wrote: "The Jew assumes for himself an historic post as sentinel, a soldier of righteousness. He protests, by his very existence, against the doctrine that right makes right, that numbers decide truth, and that possession condones every offense." Leo Baeck wrote: "The mere fact of Judaism's existence shows that it is impossible to conquer the spirit, the spirit can make man invincible and that though spirit and mind may sometimes assume the appearance of an extinct volcano, power yet dwells in them. Power which quietly renews itself, breaks out afresh and causes movement. The few are the few for the sake of God and for the sake of the spirit, they who abide, and it is from them that the great decisive effects and the fresh directions in history emanate. In respect to this fact alone I was always tempted to use a well-known phrase and to say, if Judaism did not exist one would have to invent it."

On what can such claims be based? How can intelligent men make such statements? These ideas suggested themselves to the leaders of our people as they analyzed the political events of the last century. They represent a rather sensitive analysis of what in fact happened in European history. Whenever the forces of reaction rose up against an emerging society of greater justice for the laborer and the peasant, its propaganda singled out the Jew as the enemy. When in Russia

Pobedenetsov, chief minister of the Czar and intellectual architect of Czarist absolutism declared ' one-third of the Jewish population must be destroyed, one-third must be exiled, one-third must be baptized, he justified his decision by arguing that the Jew represents the virus of liberalism whose presence within the body of Mother Russia could not be tolerated. The Jew represents to the Russian traditions which have no place in the Russian autocracy. Why was Dreyfus chosen as a scape goat by the French aristocrats, and the High Church? Because he was a Jew and the Jew stood for syndicalism and radicalism, all of which translated to mean that this little Jewish officer was the symbol of a broader order of justice and of an attack on special privilege. Why did the Germans march down unter der linden shouting 'Hep, Hep,' down with the Jews. Because Bismarck said, the Jew represents the leaven of a liberalism which we will not tolerate in Prussia, ideas which are foreign to a German way of life. What were these ideas? Were they not freedom from government control, the dignity of the individual, and a respect for a law higher than the absolutist law of the Kaiser? Why does the right in the United States sponsor the anti-Semitic literature trade? Why did Hitler and Stalin single out the Jew for special treatment? Why is the Jew killed and brutalized in autocratic nations? Because the Jew somehow has come to stand as the visible presence of the word of God which will not be silenced. He represents the Biblical mandates of

freedom and truth against the big lie and despotism, prejudice and hate. Hirsch and Baeck develop their understanding of the mission of Israel because they understood that the medieval fables about the perfidious Jew, the wandering Jew, the Jew who was to be denied and abused because his degradation proved the glory of another faith, had been turned upside down, in their day, but remained valid, the Jew was no longer a symbol of the degradation, of those who deny the faith, but a symbol of the forgotten decencies of Western civilization.

A generation ago or more when men spoke of the mission of Israel they spoke to congregations which saw and understood the vicarious role of the Jew in Western civilization. Those leaders found in Scripture a text which was surprisingly apposite:

Thus sayeth God the Lord. I, the Lord, have called thee in righteousness and have taken hold of thy hand and kept thee and set thee for a covenant of the people for a light of the nations to open the blind eyes, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon and them that sit in darkness out of the prison house.

Whenever an Emil Hirsch or a Leo Baeck preached the mission of Israel to their congregation, their congregations understood, and they felt they understood also what was demanded of those who would bring out the prisoner from the dungeon, open the blind eye and bring light into the darkness of the prison house. If you would understand some of the sensitivity of the

modern Jew to his civic responsibility, the so-called liberalism of the American Jewish community, begin in this common awareness of the mission of Israel.

But, when all is said and done, the mission of Israel is an outer directed doctrine. It assumes that simply by being we mean something to someone else. It says nothing about what being Jews means to us. We are cultural symbols, not live beings. We are Biblical Jews, not breathing Jews. We are Micah, Isaiah, Amos incarnate, not ourselves, but, we are creatures of our century. We are not the prophets of old. We want to be ourselves. And so, I believe that we have come to that period in time when the doctrine of the mission of Israel has outlived its bite and its relevance. It may even be true that we no longer have this symbolic role in the lives of other men. Certainly we occupy no such role in the unconscious of a billion Asians.

We can not live as pensioners of a bygone dream or because others require us to be Jews. If we are to be Jews today, being Jewish must make a significant difference in our lives. Let the world work out its own moral dilemmas. We will not continue to exist simply because in reaching for the Bible and for the Biblical truth Western man somehow needs the visible presence of Jews about him.

I would suggest that the time has arrived to put aside these concepts of the mission of Israel and look afresh at this problem and ask again, "why am I a Jew?" Let us answer the question personally, autobiographically. We discover

when we ask this question in these terms, it resolves itself into another : Why must I be a good Jew in order to be a good man? My answer has always been, you don't need to be, but it certainly helps. One of the major problems of modern man is the shrill competitive cry of a hundred ideologies. Each one claims to be the economic or political or social or religious or total truth. Much judgment and experience is needed to find just that degree of truth which is in any one of these systems. Where can that judgment be found but in the truth-seeking school and in Torah.

What of the problems of our day? Is it not to find decency in human relationships, to find a love between people which is not based solely or primarily on lust, to discover an ability to deal with others as human beings and not as pawns whom we use to our advantage. And what is the substance of our Jewish ethic? Is it not to be humane? To acknowledge the dignity of another, to love thy neighbor as thyself, to see the thou in other human beings. Where can we now find this better than in the teachings and the readings and the literature of our people.

What do we require in this century? Is it impatience, the willingness to uproot and to tear down, or deliberate and reasonable reform, starting where we are without treading on anyone's legitimate rights, building the broader freedoms and the larger justice. We need balance. We need judgment. We need strengthening. We need family. All these things,

the sensitive home, the truth-seeking school, the God-seeking synagogue, the justice-seeking community have been the strengths of our Jewish community. If I say this I am saying something else, and that is this, that there are no arguments, no words by which you can convince a child, your friend, a neighbor, your student, yourself, to be a Jew. That reasoning, that logic comes through life itself.

Let me speak autobiographically. I am a Jew because Judaism has always been to me a tangible, palpable reality. Love of man, Love of God, beauty and warmth, custom and ritual, encouragement, inspiration in learning and in teaching. These are real to me. They are a part of my very being. I saw them in my home. I saw them in my school. Judaism was and has remained the language, the literature, the substance of my thought. It is the best argument I know of why I must be a Jew. If we want our children to be Jews we must take that way of life which is Jewish. It is not enough to simply serve others. We must be Jews as well as civil libertarians or liberals. There is an age-old position among the rabbis, "first adorn yourself and then adorn others. First look to the family. Make sure of its security, its decency, its quality, the teachings which you are giving your children and then go teach a child in the ghetto. First ask about the decency of your personal relationships and then be concerned with the social reform. We have never been a narrowly parochial religion. We have

always had the mandate to go out and seek righteousness, to pursue justice, to proclaim freedom. But, we mistake the very strength of Judaism if this going out becomes the substance of all we do, because if we draw off too much water the well runs dry. We must constantly re-invest spiritual capital by caring for the seed of Judaism in the home. Many in Reform Judaism, I am afraid, have emphasized the prophetic, the going out, the doing, the citizenship but have forgotten the home, the learning, the warmth, the living. We forgot to implant in our children and in our grandchildren and especially in ourselves, the devotions, the discipline, the liturgies, the worship, the love of holiness which is at the very center of all that is Jewish.

Why be a Jew? Because, to be Jewish is to be sensitive. Because to be Jewish is to tap one of the most glorious spiritual histories man possesses, to have all of its wisdom, all of its inspiration, all of its heroes at our disposal. Somehow this terrifying, noble, frightening, magnificent destiny which has been the destiny of the Jew, humanizes a man, sensitizes him, and makes him wiser. And, that is, after all, what life is all about. Have we a larger role in history? I believe we do and I believe that its direction is one of the mysteries best left to God. Among the insights of the rabbis we read: "The one through whom a miracle is performed is not aware the miracle is being performed." Whatever our larger role in history may be, we are unaware of it. It may be that we do stand for God as His witnesses. If so, we

must be humble before that obligation. But, whatever our cosmic role may be that role is determined by God and not by us. All that we can determine is our own destiny. All that we can control is our own life. When we commit it to the good, to the holy, to the sacred, there is glory to be won. When we do I believe we will find a satisfactory answer to a very simple question but a very difficult question: "Why am I a Jew?"



the historic post of a sentinel and soldier of righteousness. . . . He protests by his very existence against the doctrine that might makes right, that numbers decide truth, and that possession condones every offense.

E. G. Hirsch. *Reform Advocate*, 1891, 425

not be mastered by numbers/ The mere fact of Judaism's existence shows that it is impossible to conquer the spirit, that the spirit can make men invincible, and that though spirit and mind may sometimes assume the appearance of an

extinct volcano—Judaism has often been depicted thus — power yet dwells in them, power which quietly renews itself, and breaks out afresh, and causes movement. The few, who are the few for the sake of God and for the sake of the spirit, are they who abide, and it is from them that the great and decisive effects, the fresh directions in history, emanate. In respect of this fact alone one is often tempted to use a well-known phrase, and to say: "If Judaism did not exist, one would have to invent it." ~~Without minorities there can be~~

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 He that giveth breath unto the people upon it,
 And spirit to them that walk therein:
 ¶ The Lord have called thee in righteousness,
 And have taken hold of thy hand,
 And kept thee, and set thee for a covenant of the people,
 For a light of the nations;
 To open the blind eyes,
 To bring out the prisoners from the dungeon,
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AMERICAN JEWISH ARCHIVES

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Kaddish

Friday

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Sunday

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Those who passed away this week

BELLE GURSS

MIRIAM SAMMET

BENJAMIN KAATZ

CHARLES KRAMER

HANNAH C. KOBLITZ

EDITH CLARA WEINKLE

MAX HOLLANDER

JOSEPH KOBLITZ

JENNIE WODICKA MERTZEL

SOL H. SCHÄCHTEL (Account 1st 11/26/12)

BENJAMIN F. KLEIN

SARAH BENSON HARRIS

HELEN K. WULIGER

ISAAC E. SPERLING

JENNIE REITER KLEIN

MAX FRANKEL

JACOB REDER (pronounce "Reader")

CLARA SCHWARTZ

HELEN GOODMAN ALTMAN

WALTER P. DEUTSCH

MAX M. ROTHSCHILD

EMANUEL M. MANDEL

MORRIS VERNON BROWN

HELEN M. SILBERBACH

L.A. BRAHAM

ADOLPH RITTER

Wahrheits

ROSE RICHMAN UNGER

ESTHER LEBBY

LEONORE SPERO BASSICHIS

HERMAN OPPER

HELENE R. HIMMEL

SAMUEL STERN

SOL DORSEY

HILDA W. KROHNGOLD

DR. JACOB SIEBERT

SADELLE KLEIN

SAM HARRIS

HENRY G. SEED

ALEXANDER STEINER

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