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Confirmation 1975—The Use Of The Equivocal

Daniel J. Silver

ON MAY 15, 1975, the Confirmation class of a sizeable congregation in an eastern state faced, as directed, the ark and recited in unison: "I pledge allegiance to the Torah and to the ideals for which it stands—one God, Father of mankind, exalted through justice, brotherhood and peace." The class then faced the American flag and recited the nation's pledge of allegiance. Finally, they turned to their parents, to whom they pledged "our faithfulness and our love."

Less than a fifteen-minute drive from that sanctuary, another set of confirmands made no public pledge, although at one point in the service they did rise and recite the Ten Commandments, clearly suggesting that these statements represented their understanding of the content of Israel's covenant. A half-hour's drive farther east, a class neither pledged allegiance to Torah nor recited the Decalogue. Their service defined Confirmation as "a day of search rather than of statements."

No problem bedevils liberal Jewish thought more than a question of definition: What is Judaism? We can delineate the synthesis which was accepted as Judaism by a particular group during a specific era. We describe Judaism as a process rather than a constant, as an evolving synthesis which integrates tradition, a living community, and the needs and opportunities of the day. Well and good. But what do we signal to our congregations about the substance of today's Judaism? The Confirmation service provides a useful vantage point from which to view the signals and definitions we fly before our congregations. Confirmation is a rite of affirmation and Shavuot is *zeman mattan Torah*; our treatment of these themes will necessarily reveal our assumptions about the valid content of Judaism and of the commitments incumbent on those who would be Jews.

In years past there was an accepted form for the Confirmation service, which consisted of a floral offering, the *Union Prayer Book* Shavuot liturgy, a Torah reading (Exodus 20) and a *Haftarah* (Isaiah 42), uplifting speeches written by the rabbi for delivery by the class, a sermon, a declaration of faith by the class, the blessing of the

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confirmands, and a closing prayer. The declaration of faith read: "I consecrate my life to the religion of Israel. With all my heart, with all my soul and with all my might I will strive to further the holy purposes of Judaism. Unto the end of my life Israel's watchword will be my guide." This was concluded by the recitation of the *Shema*. The music came from the liturgical repertoire, with the addition of such topical staples as "Father, See Thy Suppliant Children" by one Mrs. Sue Munn and "Lord, What Offering Shall We Bring?" A violin played Mendelssohn during the blessing. This service exalted ethical monotheism, the virtues of family and freedom, argued that America is different and that the prophetic law of righteousness was the essence of Jewish duty. Generally, little was said about Torah as a *mitzvah* or about the devotional obligations of Jewish life; and there was only a rare reference to the survival needs of the Jewish people. Despite the British White Paper, Kristallnacht and Stalin, long into the 1930s and 1940s, many services continued to signal that Judaism was a pristine set of religious principles, rather than the faith of a living people, and to suggest that a Jew's primary responsibility was to others rather than to his own.

The last few decades have seen a new emphasis on *amecha*, certainly born out of our recent experience of the tragic. There has been a parallel growth of interest in a definition of *mitzvah* which would mandate particular oughts in addition to the bracing but broad social justice mottoes of prophetic Judaism. I was intrigued to discover what I could about that definition of Judaism which informed Confirmation in our times.

I wrote to thirty-five congregations, asking the rabbi for his Confirmation program; copies of the speeches given on Confirmation day; the Declaration of Faith, if there was one; and a transcript of his charge to the class. Thirty men were kind enough to return materials, of which twenty-four submissions were complete enough to be used. The choice of congregations was random. As it turned out, most of the congregations were from Middle Atlantic states, the Midwest, and the Southwest. Nine represented congregations of over a thousand members; six had a membership of 500-1000; seven had between 100 and 500 families; and two had a membership list of under 100. There was only one congregation from the metropolitan New York area, one from Chicago, and none from Los Angeles.

Frankly, I was surprised at the extent that the Confirmation service remains faithful to the forms developed several generations ago. At least one-third of the services reviewed retained the structure and, to a large extent, the language and songs of the classic service.

Despite its Elizabethan text and difficult musical line "Lord, What Offering Shall We Bring?" was sung by one in four classes. Most services were eclectic as regards theology, source material, and symbol. One class spoke essays under the rubric "Lessons For Life" culled from Kahil Gibran and the Bible, followed by ten speeches from various sources on "The Ideals We Live By" (Holiness, Humanitarianism, Love, Truth, Freedom, Brotherhood, Kindness, Mercy, Humility, Man's Uniqueness) and by nine speeches on "Historic Jewish Values" (Respect for the Aged, Freedom of Dissent, Unity Among Jews, Responsibility and Judaism, Israel's Survival, Care for the Needy, Respect for Parents and Children, Faith and Belief, and Woman's Equality). This service, like many, was truly a *Kol-Bo*. Indeed, I came to feel that many services deliberately encouraged variety and ambiguity in order to avoid the question of definition. The "grocery list" approach had something in it to satisfy everyone.

A few facts about these services will be useful. Two of the congregations held Confirmation on *erev* Shavuot; eight on Shavuot; eight on Friday night (which this year was the evening of the second day of the festival); one on Sabbath morning; and five on Sunday. One Confirmation was held at midnight on an unspecified Saturday during a camp weekend—proof, if proof be needed, that we have not lost all touch with Safed and *tikkun hatzot*.

One-half of the services had been edited by the rabbi; three included a few speeches written by confirmands. In nine instances students had written most of the non-liturgical material, but in only six of these nine services was there evidence of a serious rabbi-confirmand process of preparation.

The Torah was read at all the services. Twenty-one read Exodus 20, two Deuteronomy 5, and one Genesis 1. Fifteen congregations read a *Haftarah*; five used Isaiah 42; seven, various portions of the book of Ruth; two, Micah 4; and one, Psalm 104.

Ten classes recited a prescribed Declaration of Faith which in every case concluded with the *Shema*. The classic declaration "I consecrate my life to the religion of Israel" survived in only one service. This denaturalized affirmation appeared in two variations:

In this solemn hour I hallow my life, in the name of the eternal God, to the religion of Israel. Whatever be my lot and wherever I may be, I promise to support the truths revealed by Judaism. Now, as ever, it shall be my aim to do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly before God, thus to harmonize my life with Israel's proclamation. . .

and

Standing before God and the Torah, we offer this prayer . . . grant us the wisdom and the courage so to live that by word and deed we may bear witness to our faith in Thee and Thy Torah.

Three congregations had revised the opening statement of the classic statement to read: "I consecrate my life to my people and my people's faith," and this national emphasis was reflected in all the other pledges.

The absence of a Declaration of Faith did not necessarily indicate that a congregation had abandoned the concept of Confirmation as a renewal of the covenant. Generally, the demise of the Declaration of Faith seemed a casualty of our "read the small print carefully" ethos and a reflection of the determined individualism of the modern. The rabbis mistrust words. The students will not be parrots. As one rabbi put it in an accompanying letter: "We abandoned the declaration several years ago when a number of the students stood silent."

The language "my people and my people's faith" seemed in the year 1975 as much a matter of congregational tradition as an existential desire for this class to pledge loyalty to the Jewish people. Generally, the change had been made some time ago and had stuck. In one service this six-word revision represented the only reference to the Jewish people made that day. Conversely, retention of the denationalized vow seemed as much a matter of tradition as a self-conscious theological statement. The one congregation still using the original text "I consecrate my life to the religion of Israel" had filled its service with speeches about the need to support the State of Israel and used Israeli and Jewish folk music in an obvious attempt to signal community and the imperatives of Jewish survival.

Music was used to signal certain loyalties. Ten congregations used only liturgical music, and in every case these services signaled a Judaism defined as a pristine set of religious principles. Eight congregations used Israeli and/or Jewish folk music, ranging from *Sahaki*, *Im Tirtzu*, *Dona Dona*, and *Am Yisrael Hai to Oyfn Pripitchok*. Three classes sang *Ani Maamin* as a tribute to the heroism of the concentration camp inmates and as a restatement of the messianic imperative. A minority of congregations, six, added pop tunes and Broadway ballads rather than "Jewish" music to their services. In every case, these were the services in which the youngsters simply affirmed where they were at the moment, or the rabbi developed the service around a pet theological position. None of the pop music services contained extended mention of the brute facts of Jewish history or of today's communal responsibilities for Jewish survival.

America The Beautiful was twice bracketed with *Hatikvah* to suggest the two levels of national loyalty held precious by many American Jews. In one service *America The Beautiful* stood alone. This service exalted a denationalized Judaism, indeed, a Judaism which escaped substantial definition. Here the affirmation was simply the *Shema*, preceded by three speeches which emphasized what Judaism is not. The first speech emphasized the inability to "reduce the rich lore and learning of Judaism to one idea." The second maintained that "we must not even attempt to define God . . . surely there is no God that we can understand." And the third held that "authentic Judaism rejected the efforts of philosophers to define what Judaism teaches and has been content, simply and purely, to acknowledge the indivisible unity of life." Twenty speeches followed, written for the confirmands and arranged in five areas: God, Torah, Israel, Brotherhood, and Religious Life. The four speeches on "Israel" managed to avoid any mention of the State of Israel. Every section was redolent with the quotations of mission rhetoric, frequently coupled with disengenuous moral theorizing.

Now is the time to form our ideals and to think about the future. We see a vision of ourselves in relation to our friends and in larger scale to American society and the world. We must be able to look at the contradictions we live with every day. We have to learn to act the way we know is the right way. If we could do that and just care about each other, I think we would have it all.

This service might have been celebrated in that congregation in the heyday of classic Reform, except for three speeches which appeared in a section of twelve original student themes. In one of these a student read "I Never Saw A Butterfly." In another the speaker suggested that "the State of Israel gave all people a sense of belonging in the world . . . by knowing there is a strong religion and state behind us, we as Jews are free to stand up for our beliefs. We think every Jew ought to visit Israel at least once in his lifetime." But these were the exception, not the rule.

Given the survivalist preoccupations reported by many observers of our communities, I was surprised that fully one-third of the services, eight in all, avoided all reference to the contemporary issues of Jewish life, the State of Israel, Soviet Jewry, Syrian Jewry, anti-Semitism, etc. Seven of these eight ostrich services did not mention the Holocaust. In twelve of the seventeen rituals in which the *Shoah* was mentioned it was, except for 1948, the only post-Biblical event mentioned. Martyr talk was rarely coupled with "life-is-with-

people" talk. Apparently there is a broad acceptance of the Christian periodization of Jewish history into a creative Biblical period and a long post-Biblical era of patient suffering. Many pageants and speeches imaginatively evoked the prophets and patriarchs, but in only one service and one cantata, "This Immortal Band," was the period between 70 and 1948 treated as a time of creative culture and of warm and effective communal life.

Twenty-three of the 24 services dwelt at some length on our responsibilities as Jews to all men. The speeches tended to be broad-gauged rather than specific—what I call mission rhetoric. Though often passionate, there was little indication that the political and ethical judgments expressed were historically grounded in the Jewish tradition. One service grouped its speeches under the rubric "Valid Suggestions for World Peace," and in content and thesis these might well have come from a high school civics class. There were hopeful references to World Federalism, the European Economic Community, the United Nations, UNICEF, the Peace Corps, but not a single reference to the reality of Israel being manhandled by a United Nations packed with diplomats of oily conscience or ideological anger. Another service, far more sophisticated because of rabbinic authorship, dealt with the complex nature of man as reflected in Shakespeare, Carlyle, Schopenhauer, and a few Biblical passages, and proceeded to show that the war in Vietnam and Watergate reflected our imperfect constitution—all this interspersed with poetic readings taken from the likes of John Donne and Langston Hughes. It might well have been written by the national office of ADA for circulation to its member chapters.

At the other extreme, one service was devoted entirely to Jewish survival. The Confirmation booklet was entitled "Masada." The class song was "Masada Shall Not Fall Again." The class pledge read: "We have been stirred by the courage of our ancestors. We shall maintain the traditions that bind us, not only to the zealots of Masada, but to every generation of Jews past and future." Student speeches dealt with Masada, Egyptian slavery, the Bar Kochba revolt, the Spanish Inquisition, the Nazi Holocaust, the problems of modern day Israel, Soviet Jewry, and the issue of maintaining Jewish rights in America. Such survivalist thoughts and the complementary cantata accompanied a minimal liturgy. There was no attempt to balance this emphasis with language suggesting duties beyond those owed our own.

Clearly, a number of rabbis/confirmands/congregations have not unified "If I am not for myself, who will be for me" and "If I am

for myself alone, what am I" into a coherent and comfortable philosophy. One class aggressively donated their class fund to World Hunger:

In the past years classes have given some material gift to the Temple. Our class has opted to give something more idealistic. It is hard to stay separated from the rest of humanity. It is important to broaden our scope beyond our community, beyond our congregation, beyond our country, and especially beyond ourselves. We must be in brotherhood with all human beings. . . . We are responsible for our fellow human beings; their well-being is our well-being. In keeping with this spirit, the class has elected to reach out to the world and share the blessings that we have. This gift will be in the form of a gift to World Hunger relief and hopefully this will set an example for others to follow" (italics mine).

Another class indicated in its printed program that "the members of this class have decided to bring but one rose each to the floral offering instead of a full bouquet; and to offer the sum saved thereby to Israel."

As one might expect, the two services reflected the gifts. The World Hunger group avoided all reference to Jewish history or Jewish survival needs. There was no class affirmation. The cantata emphasized that the Torah had been given in a no man's land, to teach that "no single nation, no one people, possesses the Torah; it belongs to all mankind," and that the Torah had been written before creation began so that none could claim it. The music selected to complement the liturgy was neither Israeli nor UAHC camp but 'Morning Glow' from *Pippin*. The "flowers for Israel" congregation vowed "to keep the promise of the Jewish people." Its service included many specific references to Israel, the Arab threat, the attack on Zionism as a form of covert anti-Semitism, and placed a heavy emphasis on the martyrdom of our history: "Yet we survive." The class theme was *Am Yisrael Hai*.

Most services fell between these poles and simply piled up speeches until most topics were at least mentioned. The class and the congregation could freely select their definition of Judaism. I found only one service which included a serious attempt to integrate and verbalize the inescapable tension between prophetic mission and national survival which accompanies our lives as Jews. These thoughts, written by the rabbi, were spoken towards the end of that service.

- a) The world has no respect for a man who does not respect himself. The world has no place for a man who sees no place for himself. Often we must stand apart from the world.

b) We live in an age of universalism. The world grows closer together, not only in distances but also in the way of life. As the world awakens to the message born in Judaism, that all men are brothers and are alike in more ways than they are different, we have begun to emphasize the things that draw men together rather than separate them.

c) The danger of this way of life is that cultures and religions and ways of life are threatened. The great temptation is to give up all their differences and become like everyone else. Some people in today's world do find some kind of universal existence—a sort of conglomeration of everything around—to be a meaningful way of life. Such a way of life, though, is unsteady and usually shallow. It lacks the kind of roots that penetrate deep into the soil of life and draw survival into its limbs.

Twenty-one of the 24 services made some direct reference to the concept of covenant. Most suggested that the covenant had specific conditions and signaled that these were somehow defined by the *Shema*, the Decalogue, and “it has been told thee. . . ,” Judaism as ethical monotheism. A few services shied away from proclaiming the *Shema*, Exodus 20, Micah 6, and the promise of tomorrow as the operative terms of Judaism. They did so by emphasizing the theme of religious search. One such service used as its theme Heschel's title “God in Search of Man—Man in Search of God.” It consisted of a series of quite literate readings culled from here and there by a rabbi who prefaced his booklet: “Searching for meaning and understanding and purpose cannot end with a ceremony . . . you are the person God is in search of—the person Judaism (sic) needs—the person who will decide whether there is such a thing as humanity or not.” The portions chosen (Wiesel, *The Seventh Day*, Potok, Buber, Heschel) were evocative or evasive, depending on one's point of view. No single contemporary issue was encountered. There was no class affirmation. It was hard to tell what definition of Judaism such a service implied.

To achieve vagueness as to the specifics of covenant, some rabbis made good use of Buber and Heschel. Most confirmands had not read either of these gentlemen; so they achieved vagueness through confessional statements or “pop” sociology. In one service each confirmand wrote a Jewish position paper. Some of the statements were sensitive. Others revealed little more than “it is very difficult for me to explain what I feel about Judaism, but I know for a fact that I am a Jew. . . .” Some youngsters had developed a meaningful identification. “I believe this year of preparation helped me to understand what it means to be a Jew. This does not mean that I fully comprehend all that Judaism means, but I do realize my heritage is precious . . . further I must be actively involved in what concerns

my people." Another was still conducting polls among her Catholic, Lutheran, and Jewish friends to find out what is Judaism. She concluded that "we cannot even begin to answer that question." There was little liturgy, no rabbinic charge, and no class pledge.

An older, middle-size congregation in a border state held a Sunday afternoon exercise which concentrated exclusively on the theme of creation. The theme was introduced by a pop tune 'A Time For Everything' and consisted largely of poetic readings on the miracle of life, interspersed with a few strictures about ecology. The term covenant was never used. Sinai was not mentioned. There was no affirmation. There were no Israeli or folk tunes. No statements were made about the existential problems of Jewish life. Only in the closing prayer was there any sense of belonging to the larger Jewish community: "We ask for strength today as we became part of our people's history which extends across the ages. May we add to its creative strength and brighten its glory by all that we hope to be." The reader must wonder what this class conceived as the obligations of loyalty to "our people."

Neither congregational history nor social class fully explains the "why" of this service. A congregation similar in every way, border state, middle-sized, with a long Reform history, produced the Masada service with its wholly survivalist emphasis. Clearly, Confirmation bears the rabbi's imprint; what he teaches and affirms is what is emphasized.

Those congregations which used the *Union Prayer Book* managed to evoke the manifold dimensions of Jewish commitment more successfully than those which did not. The *U.P.B.* service is rich and balanced. Congregations which reduced service to bare bones, particularly if they gave the service a single theme, generally beat that single idea to death, and in the process failed to suggest the creative and stimulating tensions of Jewish thought. The single theme service had as topics Creation, Freedom, the Nature of Man, and Masada—and each left this writer with many questions. The Creation service approached pantheism; Genesis 1 and Psalm 104 were read, and there was not a single reference to *mitzvah*. The Masada service failed to raise the issues of faith and of a larger duty. The service of The Nature of Man reduced Judaism to sociology and the New Republic. The theological underpinning of this service was suggested in one of the few speeches written by the class: "Judaism was developed to express and satisfy the needs of a particular group of people." The reader then asked what in our modern society Judaism has to offer, and he answered: "for the members of this Confirmation class,

simply the ethics of Judaism.”

In perhaps one-third of the services the historical image behind Shavuot, Sinai, seemed inappropriate. The thundering voice of God has given way to the occasional search for God. The theme of obedience, the humble submission of *naaseh v'nishmah* has given way to the exaltation of “doing one’s thing.” The sense of a covenant with specific terms has given way to social humanism labeled the law of righteousness.

In the remaining services there is a willing if somewhat fuzzy commitment to Judaism and the Jewish people. The values of prophetic Judaism and of Jewish survival are spoken about, but the forms chosen lack unity and the language is often equivocal. Ambiguity is the cloth from which many of these services are cut.

Random Conclusions:

1. My correspondents indicate that most, if not all, the services were well accepted. And there is every reason to credit this judgment. Paradoxically, the equivocal nature of what was stated and affirmed had much to do with the congregation’s approval. In most services everyone could find his or her definition of Judaism and be pleased that this was acceptable to the next generation.

2. The confirmation year leaves many students with the impression that Judaism can be defined by the *Shema*, the Ten Commandments, a few prophetic statements on righteousness, an expression of hope in the future, and some remembrance of heroisms past. Such a Judaism can be much or little, depending on how each person interprets these signals. I cannot put out of mind the member I had not seen in the Temple these past twenty years whom I met recently on the street. He came on strong: “I am a good Jew. I don’t have to go to *shul*. I obey the Ten Commandments. That’s what it’s all about.” He makes a good living, is divorced, is alienated from two of his children, gives to various causes what the government allows him to give, and plays a fair game of golf.

3. Rabbis control the Confirmation service and can do with it largely what they will.

4. Rabbis find it easier to signal the duties implicit in ‘it has been told thee, O man’ than those which specify elements in our devotional lives or which are required for the survival of the Jewish people. There is a time-related problem here as well as a theological one. Confirmation is hardly the time for a complicated statement on the political situation in the Middle East. Then, too, what are the

mitzvot of survival? When they talked of Israel, the youngsters mentioned only the *mitzvot* of touring and the UJA. Liberal Judaism lacks a theology of land and a *halachah* of *aliyah* which would include, but not be limited to, immigration.

5. Rabbis find it easier to signal civic duties than those required for a devotional life. By failing to mention the devotional life, twenty of the twenty-four services, in effect, equated living as a Jew with compassion, social justice, and freedom. Despite the familiar identification of Shavuot as *zeman mattan Torah* only four services mentioned the *mitzvah* of *Talmud Torah* and none provided a reading list. Whenever the speeches were organized as a running commentary to the Ten Commandments, the Sabbath had to be talked about; but in every instance the Sabbath was treated as a pregnant spiritual idea rather than a specific obligation. "The Jewish Sabbath was created to permit man to find release from the labors of the week, to divert his mind from the affairs of the world to the devotion of God. Let us keep alive the holy purpose of the day of rest." If these Confirmation services reflect the commitments of Reform Jews, we are a long way from the *Shulhan Aruch*.

6. Most of the services indicate that the rabbis do not know where they can easily lay their hands on literature or language which would express effectively an integrated definition of Judaism.

Those who tried to escape mission rhetoric or mystical vagueness generally resorted to a historically oriented cantata. The history of our people is real and, because of that, heroic. Unfortunately, the cantatas centered almost entirely on the Biblical period and treated the post-Biblical centuries as one unbroken experience of "the sorrow and the pity." There is a need for pageants and readings which treat of community as well as of prophecy, and which display the creativity of the Diaspora as well as the brilliance of Biblical thought.

7. A different *Haftarah* could be chosen. When Exodus 20 is bracketed with the mission rhetoric of Isaiah 42, or the beautiful vagueness of Micah 6, or the dreamy idyll which is the book of Ruth, there is simply no Biblical peg on which to base statements about the devotional and survivalist obligations incumbent upon liberal Jews.

8. The minority of rabbis who disdain survivalist issues apparently do so because they are committed utopians who feel that there is no hope for anyone unless everyone "dreams the impossible dream" and lives as if the cruel realities of the political world were not, in fact, realities. This group is indifferent, if not antagonistic, to history, defines theology as search, worries about parochialism, and conceives of Judaism as a set of reformist imperatives.

The minority of rabbis who focus exclusively on survival have been traumatized by the crises of recent Jewish history. The obligation of the Jew is to make it possible for Jews to survive. The mission of Israel is a corporate one. The Jewish God is found in the history of His people. Judaism is the faith of the Jewish people. Obligation begins at home.

Have such teachers the right to impose their special theologies or limited emotional needs on Confirmation? The question must be asked.

Most rabbis are of the both/and school. They present Judaism as a broad undertaking, involving both universalistic and particularistic elements. Judaism is sensitive ethical concern, and social justice, and loving participation in the community of Israel, and the cultivation of a Jewish devotional life. Their services are inclusive but generally lack coherence. Ideas are piled up rather than integrated.

Life is by nature full of paradox and equivocal statements can suggest depths of meaning, but they can also suggest meaninglessness. I have a feeling that many of our confirmands leave Confirmation convinced that Judaism is a *Kol-Bo*, whatever they wish it to be.

I am more than convinced that, for stylistic rather than philosophic reasons, the middle range of Confirmation services is excessively weighted towards the universal. Universalist concerns can be stated poetically. The particular must be rooted in a concrete situation and requires careful and qualified statement—prose. Many, unfortunately, equate nobility of expression with profundity of thought, when, in fact, nobility of expression may be the mask of vagueness. For too long we have piled one high-sounding phrase after another into our Confirmation programs with the result that we have bleached concrete implications out of our tradition.