

RABBI'S REPORT TO THE CONGREGATION

TEMPLE BETH ISRAEL, SHARON, PENNSYLVANIA, ANNUAL CONGREGATIONAL MEETING, SUNDAY, APRIL 17, 1966

As we are all aware, this is my last opportunity to report to you officially on the progress and prospect of the congregation. I would begin, however, with a word of congratulations to the pulpit committee, to the Board of Directors, and to the entire congregation, for its election of Rabbi Bernard Honan as its spiritual leader. I know that Rabbi Honan will bring to his ministry maturity, experience, and dedication; and I believe that the congregation has chosen wisely and well.

The temptation is very strong, on such an occasion as this, to justify one's own prejudices and preferences in the past. However, I have not found it too difficult to overcome that temptation. A much stronger temptation exists, nonetheless, to use the occasion for one last scolding of the community for those matters which <sup>one</sup> I consider to be failings and shortcomings, and particularly for those matters which have caused the Rabbi a good deal of aggravation and frustration in the past four-and-a-half years. I have been enabled to withstand this temptation, fortunately, by bearing in mind that the temptation must be strong for the congregation as well to use the occasion to remind the Rabbi of those matters which the congregation feel have been his shortcomings and failings during that time. In other words, mutually, I hope, we agree to let the past remain past without recrimination.

Uppermost in my heart at this time is a sense of gratitude. So many of you have worked so selflessly and devoted in the causes that I hold dear that it would be impossible for me to do justice to you with public listing of names. I am sure that you know that I speak of you, and I am equally sure that you have worked as you have without thought of public applause from your fellow congregants.

Certain problems face us in the future, however; and they can neither be ignored nor evaded for long. Particularly, we have the problem in Sharon of what we mean by Jewish



life. The workmen's circle recently published these words in reference to Jewish identity: "The great weakness of American-Jewish life today stems from the root fact that it is a Jewishness the great majority of Jews relegate to others to practice...the so-called religious Jew is in most cases a Jew with but the vaguest idea of what Jewish religion stands for and is certainly not willing to practice even a small fraction of Jewish laws in his home... The religious Jew confines his activity to selecting a Rabbi to practice his Jewishness for him...The Zionist Jew, likewise, delegates the difficult task of preserving Jewish peoplehood to the State of Israel and its citizens...a tourist trip once in a lifetime is usually enough. He is satisfied with supporting the United Jewish Appeal, with buying Israel Bonds, and letting his money do what he himself is not willing nor ready to do. The rich Jew similarly assigns the practice of Jewishness to his check book..."

I think the point is clear. We are relegating Judaism to a juvenile religion: something for the children to practice or study when they are young, but nothing of sufficient concern to engage a serious adult. You know that I think this is a criminal mistake and one which is more common in the Shenango Valley than in any other community of which I have knowledge. I have not been able to persuade you of the folly of such a life and it is my most fervent prayer that Rabbi Honan will succeed, particularly in this area of activity.

A corollary of this is the increasing professionalization of our Jewish activity. More and more the American Jewish community as a whole has turned to developing professionally trained and experienced leaders to lead Jewish activity and programming. I think this is commendable as far as it goes. However, some of the activity and the programming, and all of the living, lies beyond the reach of the most highly trained and inspiring professional. Judaism is essentially "do-it-yourself religion". It requires followers as well as leaders, participants as well as program directors.



In our small community, for example, we do not have a facility for Jewishly training teachers, professional teachers, to teach in our Temple Religious program. Therefore, we must call upon the membership at large to provide willing and talented volunteers for this arduous and sometimes unrewarding task. It is a chancey job at best. Jewish teachers in such a community as ours are required to evaluate academically the children of their social friends. They are required to be strict with those children whom they regard almost as members of their own family. They are required to teach what all too often they are themselves unwilling to practice.

In the past two years, teachers for our Religious School have been harder and harder to find. If the younger members of our community are unwilling to take on the responsibility, then ultimately the congregation will have the choice of closing the school or of tripling its budget in order to attract professionally trained teachers from Cleveland and Pittsburgh. Neither prospect is attractive to me nor to you. But the alternative depends on your willingness to work and work and work hard.

Another case in point is the musical aspect of our worship. We have a professional musician as organist and choir director to lead a dedicated and able group of volunteers, whose number is unfortunately diminishing each year. There are many young people in our community who enjoy singing. Where are they when recruits for our Choir are sought? Once again we are faced with three choices: The young people must either come forth and spend two evenings a week in the Temple as Choir members, or else the congregation must discontinue its musical service, or else the congregation must triple its budget for its musical service and ensure that adequate professional singers, tenor, bass, soprano, and alto, are available for each service, at least one in each category. I find ~~that~~ these latter two alternatives undesirable, and I am sure that you agree. But we have learned to our dismay, that without strong lead voices in every category of choral work, no choir, no matter how dedicated, will sound musical. The greatest choir director in the world cannot produce a satisfying musical



sound from a dwindling handful of <sup>untrained</sup> voices. The choice is once again yours.

I will not pretend that I have never been dissatisfied or annoyed in the past four-and-a-half years. But it would be untrue and deceptive to end on such a note. These past years have been for my family and myself a time filled with reward and friendship, a time of growth and valuable experience, a period of personal investment in the life of a community of warm and amiable people. I am grateful to you all for the opportunities you have given me, and as we go forth now to what may be the ultimate challenge, I pray that you will always have reason to be proud that I was once your Rabbi.

Thank you.