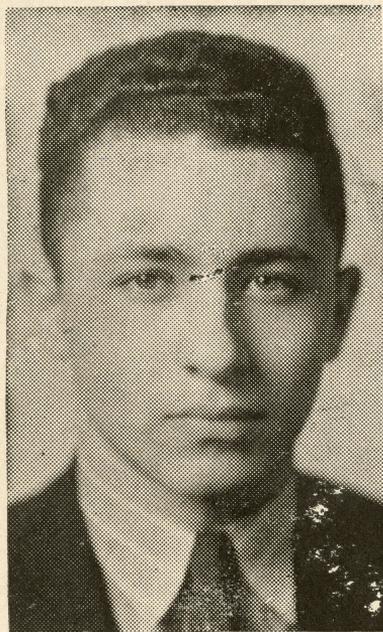


Rabbi's Message

ANY ONE who has witnessed the High Holy Day preparations of our immediate ancestors, must be impressed with the flagrant superficiality that marks their celebration today. Our fathers, in their "naive" belief, were moved by the terror of Yom Hadin, The Day of Judgment. They truly soared to spiritual heights. For them Rosh Hashannah really constituted a day of destiny, a day upon which every living being is judged, "who shall live and who shall die."



Before the Yom Hadin, they had to "square" themselves with man and God. They visited those whom they had wronged and begged for their forgiveness. Their prayers and beseechings on the Supreme Day were uttered in sincerity and devotion. This earnestness was true not only of the Yomim Noraim (Days of Awe), but of every religious celebration. The celebration of Rosh Hashannah and Yom Kippur was only a part of the "culture" which molded the life of the Jew. His culture in its entirety created a people whose spiritual life could truly be a "light to the nations". If there was such a thing as a "Jewish heart", Judaism and all it implies was directly responsible for it.

Judaism exercised its influence upon succeeding generations only so long as it was the cultural possession of the Jewish people. A modern sociologist in his discussion of human relationships defines "culture" as a "product of human association which becomes a social possession of the group of people that maintain it. When we speak of the culture of a group we mean the ways of living and thinking that are characteristic of the people who share a common social experience. The culture of the group becomes the background which

colors the individual life of each member of the group. Culture is thus the product of social heritage. It passes on from generation to generation and also from group to group." Culture then is the product of human relationships and social consciousness.

It is on this count that we have reason to be concerned with the future of Jewish life. There is a certain apathy prevalent in all of Jewish life today. Because we are "clever modern Jews" we cannot understand the value of tradition, which we call "ancestor imitating." In comparison with material values they seem impractical. But are they? Can the modern Jew completely sever himself from his tradition without any danger to his happiness and peace of mind.

For the individual to reach the heights of his own character he must be dependent upon the molding influence of his cultural community. Yet, Jewish life today is marked by a dangerous independence on the part of many Jews; an aloofness which is a perpetual obstacle to creative cultural cooperation. The holidays and religious ceremonies were always a form of social expression of the whole Jewish community. Today they leave us cold. We avoid each other and congregate only when it is absolutely necessary, for negative purposes. For the correction of group ills and not for group creativeness. How long it is since we have been able to accept new prayers into our liturgy, expressive of the group emotion and experience. We lack folk songs. We are out of touch with our literature which is wealthy. We rarely avail ourselves of the opportunities afforded us by the many English works on Jewish history and modern Jewish thought. How many homes in the community possess nothing more than the copy of the Bible presented to the confirmands? How many Jews are aware of the great Jewish Bible commentaries of the last few years? In truth the non-Jewish Bible students by far outnumber the Jewish, out of all proportion to their majority in population. The literature that still lives does so only by virtue of the "charity" of a few wealthy philanthropists and a few immigrants.

One of the greatest forces which preserved Israel was the realization of a Jewish social consciousness—the realization by all Jews of the significance of the brotherhood of Israel. As a modern philosopher expresses it, "The 'Jewishness of the Jew', his social consciousness, and his group feeling which were so clearly and inseparably united with his 'religion'—these have been the great preservation forces of the Jewish people throughout the ages". Our spiritual nationality has lived so long because it consisted of two essentials; First, we were always in possession of a common legacy, viz., the Torah, our way of

life, our historical experiences; Second, we possessed the will, the desire to continue to make the best use of the heritage received. It is these two principles; tradition, the wealth of the past; together with our hope for the future—which we consider the essentials of the social consciousness of the Jewish People. In Biblical times it was already recognized that for, “each man to do that which is upright in his own eyes” was one of the greatest menaces to society. The weakness of Jewish life today is due to a disintegration of our collective character.

Those two principles, a common past and a common future, so essential to Jewish consciousness are no longer with us. Unfortunately, it has become fashionable in certain quarters to ridicule the Jew who shows sympathy with tradition—with the past. Not only is there a colossal ignorance of the culture created by the past, but we spurn even sugar-coated presentations of the past. Our children are not permitted to spend too much time on those studies which are indispensable to a creative Jewish existence. We would much rather make of them third class musicians than first class Jews. An old sage in his interpretation of the sentence, “Yisroel lo yoda, ami lo hisbonon”.—“Israel doth not know, my people doth not consider”, seems to strike a perfect description of our day. “Israel doth not know—l’she’abar—what was in the past, therefore, my people doth not consider—L’atid—the need of the future. Without a thorough knowledge of what was in the past we cannot remold life for a new and wholesome future. Nay, we cannot even apply Jewish principles and ideals to our present.

Just as a child begins with only sensations and perceptions, and accumulates knowledge and experiences through its environment, so does the race go through an identical process. It starts without any belief, standards or values, but gradually acquires them in the course of its development. As its world of ideas expands, as a result of the social tradition which it has been acquiring, it substitutes a supplementary environment of ceremonies to keep its vital experiences alive for succeeding generations. To throw off tradition means to drop everything that has gone towards the development of the mature character and to step back to childhood or, in the case of the race, to the state of the barbarian.

Jewish life as we know it is back in its second childhood. We have forsaken our tradition and have ceased to function as a history-creating group. We seem to want to avoid each other’s cultural company. The Synagogues are empty outside of the High Holy Days. We

throw ourselves blindly into petty pleasures in order to avoid Jewish cultural fellowship. I should be afraid to underestimate the number of Jews who would rather worship at the evanescent shrine of Shirley Temple than carry their children through the thrilling historical experiences of the Passover Seder. Seldom do Jews accept the repeated invitations for cultural gatherings at the Synagogue. We meet only for purposes of defensives. In spite of a much-heralded philanthropy and "klal-tuershaft", there is a dangerous weakness in our communal structure. The horizon of our community is restricted to the limits of each individual's personal ambitions.

I do not mean that the Jew must be segregated from the cultural life of the majority. On the contrary, anything that is valuable in the pattern of American life should be included in the plan of American Jewish consciousness. The "beauties of Japheth" must be welcome "in the tents of Shem". Fitting in to American life, however, does not preclude the Jew from fostering his own historical, national, and spiritual values to a maximum degree compatible with his life as an American. Merely praying as a Jew is not the maximum. The fact is that most of the very persons who think it is do very little praying. Jewish fellowship must arise out of a conscious need for social status and self-respect. The Jew cannot find status by complete identification with American society. For the different religious conditioning would clash. In fact the effort on the part of some Jews to find status in non-Jewish fellowship is resented by the non-Jew. It gives the impression of intrusion. His readiness to adopt their culture and nourish his spiritual being on their creativity implies a lack of his own, and seems to the gentile a form of cultural parasitism. To gain status and self-respect they must belong to a group who are of their own conditioning and culture. "Jews must seek Jewish fellowship in an organized Jewish community life". And so strong must be that sense of fellowship that it will transcend all antagonisms whether based on ideology or economics. The Jew who deserts the community on the excuse of religious conviction (the excuse that the Synagogue is either a shade too pious or too reformed), indicates a complete lack of sincerity in his Jewish fellowship. Many such Jews lack any religious conviction. I am not asking for uniform belief and opinion. Such a state would be monotonously disastrous. But Jews must be able to hold different views and still be able to work together for the social, cultural and religious welfare of the community.

RABBI HARRY SEEVE.