

Hope

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THERE is a steady undertone of pessimism that runs through many of the articles in our journal, as also in Jewish literature generally, regarding the survival of Judaism in America. Permit me, as one who gave fifty-two years of professional Jewish social service to Jewish communities here, to express a note of hope and optimism.

The point I want to make is well-illustrated by the following true anecdote.

Years ago I conducted a sort of Jewish forum at our old Elizabeth "Y". I was startled when the local Orthodox rabbi complained that we never introduced anyone to explain properly the Orthodox Jewish point of view. It would be nice if we let him select such a speaker. OK. The man he brought to us was a lay national leader in Orthodoxy. The speaker held that only Orthodoxy was "Torah-true"; the Orthodox is the only group that retains the pure tradition intact, as handed down from of old.

When he finished, our rabbi declaimed that, "If our ancestors, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were to come alive and visit Elizabeth, the only place where they would feel at home would be in the Orthodox schul."

I could not help countering with, "If our ancestors Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were to come alive and visit an Orthodox schul in town, they first wouldn't know what it was all about. In their time, they knew not Torah, Talmud, synagogue, rabbi, nor the prayer service! Their method of expressing such Jewishness as they had was to sacrifice a lamb, let us say; burn it on an altar without the intercession of a profes-

sional priest, with the hope that its 'fragrant incense' might please the God."

I agree with Max Dimont's latest opus, *The Indestructible Jews*, that the major *ideas and ideals*, which constitute the Jewish tradition as a *culture*, have come down to our time more or less intact; but the major *practical ways* by which our ancestors learned to express these same ideas and ideals changed radically several times over the millenia. According to Dimont, Judaism never congealed its practices immutably. It therefore never became a civilization, and therefore did not die as have so many other civilizations.

Once the Israelites reached ancient Palestine, it took them over 500 years for the Torah, with its prescribed practices, many of them learned from the native Canaanites and Philistines, to be canonized by Ezra the Scribe. The basic practice was to express Judaism of those days through sacrifices by priests at the Second Temple, at stated times.

The bulk of the Jews remained in Babylon for the next 1500 years, until about 1000 A.D. Prior to the Captivity, that which we call the "synagogue" was unknown. It probably arose as a community meeting-house for Jews in the exile, since "synagogue" means a "coming-together". It is probable that nostalgia among Jews led to the use of the community center for some Jewish learning. Thus it also became a house of learning, or "Hebrew school". Best students were encouraged to become teachers or "rabbis"; but had to earn their living from some other calling.

When Rome finally scattered Jews

all over the empire, and Temple, priesthood, and sacrifices were no more, the synagogue took over, not only as a center, not only as a school, but also as a house of prayer; for prayer services were developed in place of the sacrifices, and the rabbi began to come into his own as teacher and leader and judge.

The Babylonian experience also gave us the Babylonian Talmud, as one reflection of the different environment in which Jews then lived in numbers. It took nearly 1,000 years to develop.

When the Babylonian Jewry declined, new centers for Jews arose in France, Spain, and Germany after 1000 A.D.

In France, Rashi gave new interpretations to Bible and Talmud, which enabled European Jews in Spain and Germany to develop codes by which Orthodox Jews swear today. Let me now relate at least one major change in Jewish practices, developed as an accommodation to medieval Jewish life in France.

In Mohammedan lands, Jews were permitted to have as many as four wives. In Christian France, non-Jews looked askance at Jews with four wives (or was it jealousy?). Rashi's grandson, Rabbenu Tam, therefore decreed that Jews were to take only one wife thereafter; and this practice has remained to this day.

(My father used to comment, apropos this state of affairs, "In olden times, a Jew had it good. He had four wives; so they would be so busy fighting among themselves, they would leave him in peace!")

In their Golden Age, the Jews of Spain developed practices foreign to the Jews of Babylonia or in Palestine. Maimonides united Aristotelian Greek reasoning with our own tradition; whereas the older Jewish communities used Platonic reasoning. Also from Spain stemmed the Sephardic ritual of

practically expressing old Jewish values. That ritual developed over a period of 500 years.

Jews in medieval Germany had great rabbis who gave an Ashkenazic cast to the code of Maimonides; a cast which Orthodoxy still cherishes. They spoke a German dialect which became Yiddish.

Due to the terrors of the Crusades, Jews were glad to flee from Germany to Poland and the Ukraine, where at first they were welcomed as a middle-class of entrepreneurs and managers of the estates of the nobles. They served their masters too well. The peasantry knew only the Jewish tax-collectors and grew to hate them. Thus arose pogroms. Then, when Poland was dismembered, and Russia gained great numbers of unwelcome Jews, she fenced them into the shtetl-ghettos; carried on the pogroms learned from the Poles and Cossacks; cut them off from the general Enlightenment that brought the middle-class, or bourgeoisie, into prominence by the beginning of the 19th century.

In the stifling milieu of the ghetto-shtetls, Jews turned inward upon themselves and developed a shtetl-Judaism, based on pilpulistic Talmudism; synagogue, school, rabbi and prayer bearing an Ashkenazic imprint, such as my father brought with him to New York before the turn of the century. Alternatively, the same environment developed mystic Hasidism, which spurned Talmudism.

Again, it took several hundred years to develop shtetl-Orthodox-Judaistic practices, which helped Jews survive in the ghettos.

Then, at the beginning of the 19th century, when Napoleon opened the gates of the ghettos, and Jews became highly-educated citizens, under the Emancipation and Enlightenment, in France, Germany, and England, they

also became leaders in all sorts of endeavors. This aroused the jealousy of the majority of non-Jews in such lands. Thus arose a new form of anti-Jewishness. In place of the old religious bias, non-Jews now developed a spurious "scientific" Anti-Semitism, based on the idea that "Aryans" are superior to "Semites", such as Jews. This reached its climax under Hitler. This led to disillusion with Emancipation and Enlightenment, from which arose new methods of expressing Judaism, such as are embodied in Reform and Conservative Judaism, Zionism, Labor Judaism, and charity-centered and Jewish social work-centered Judaism, of which we Jewish social workers of the CJCS are shining exemplars.

When the Temple-priest-sacrificial ritual failed as a major practical expression of ancient Jewishness, the synagogue - school - rabbi - prayer - Talmud method took its place and helped Judaism survive in the Diaspora. Today, in Western lands where freedom is still practiced, it is true that the rabbinical-synagogue-prayer-Talmud method is failing, as Dimont so well points out. That is the main reason why so many of us are Cassandras. But let us examine the case in America and Israel.

I can remember back to 1900 as a child brought up in a strictly old-fashioned Orthodox Jewish home on New York's Jewish East Side. In the seventy-one years since then, in my lifetime of remembrance, I have seen American Jews gradually adopting new ways to express old Jewish values adapted to the American scene, just as our ancestors did to theirs.

Thus, my father went to schul on Fridays *before* sundown. It is becoming standard practice among most American Jews, who do attend Friday night services, to go there after supper, at 8 PM, even in winter.

My parents made very little fuss about the Chanukah in December. Notice how large it looms today, even in our American non-sectarian schools, as an evident answer-back to the Christmas lure.

Who ever heard of a "Bat Mitzvah" when I was a child? In fact, I never witnessed one until my own granddaughter went through exactly the same routine on a Friday night and Saturday morning as does a Bar Mitzvah-nik. Under Women's Lib in America, I predict that Jewish women will be pushing for more and more Bat Mitzvahs instead of the traditional Shevuoth confirmations; and that Jewish women, the greatest supporters of the synagogues, will more and more be demanding that they are human beings equal to men at least, just as valuable as men in forming minyans, or in being Presidents of synagogues, and serving as rabbis.

Why not?

My father would have stood aghast at the vast expenditures Jews make in America today, "*sich aus-zu-feinen*" as he would say, at their son's Bar Mitzvah. He bought two herrings and a bottle of schnapps at mine. It didn't stop me from being (I hope) a devoted Jewish professional through so many decades.

As to lox-'n-bagel breakfasts to attract a minyan on a *Sunday* morning yet, that surely would have made my father call such Jews "goyim". Yet it has become standard operating procedure in all kinds of schuls.

And how many Jews are buried in plain wooden boxes today?

Next, compare medieval or shtetl-Jewish communal charity with present-day Jewish social work and fund-raising in America. We professional Jewish social workers are a new breed, a peculiar partial reaction by Jews to the

American environment. While we still hold fast to Jewish ideas and ideals, our practices as social workers certainly are far more sophisticated and different from the Gemilat Chasodim of my father's time, or the old-time United Hebrew Charities.

Now, what about my own field, namely the YM-YWHA or Jewish community center movement? It has grown large in America, almost rivaling synagogue membership numbers; and it is growing abroad, even in Israel.

Back in the 1930's, when our Elizabeth (N.J.) Association was coming into its own, my father used to ask me, "Zu vos, ta-ke, darf man hoben a YMHA? Vos tust du da?" (What do we need a "Y" for? What are you trying to accomplish?) For this was a brand-new institution in Jewish life, previously totally unknown in European Jewish communities; an institution which arose first among Jewish youth, then was adopted by adults, also as a reaction to the American milieu.

Since those days, we YMHA workers have seen the synagogue more and more adopt major features of the "Y"s, such as health clubs, swimming pools, gymnasias, basketball teams, youth clubs, dances and similar social events, bowling leagues, meeting accommodations for organizations other than that of the congregation, and so forth. Verily, the synagogue is going back to being primarily a community center, much more than serving as a house of prayer and study.

The Jewish tradition always, until recent times, had a twofold aspect, namely the religious and the national, both inextricably intertwined. Even in the Diaspora, for example, we were a *scattered nation*. Today we see that marriage dissolving. Jews in America can-

not be true Jewish nationalists; we have to be "American citizens of the Jewish persuasion". In Israel, they can be atheists, yet still be good Jews, as nationalist and patriotic Israelis. This must result in a form of Jewish expression in Israel that will be radically different from that in future American Jewry.

Two examples: We celebrate Independence Day in July; they, in April. Their music is lively, Arabic; sounds outlandish to my ears accustomed to the plaintive tunes my mother sang, and that I still occasionally like to sing.

Thus do I see the methods by which American Jews express in practice their traditional viewpoints change even in the span of one generation of Jews living here; yet we still cherish Jewish traditional ideas and ideals. I dare say that they even help form or underpin the ideology of the wildest in our midst (as they did that of Marx).

No; Judaism is not dying in America. It is merely changing its practical methods of expressing itself, so as to live more comfortably in America, even as in Israel, a nation at arms.

The Cassandras are too impatient. Even a Mordecai Kaplan could not, sitting in his study, plan out *the* new method for American Jewry! If it took Temple-Judaism and the Torah at least 500 years to develop in ancient Palestine; if it took Babylonian Jewry more than 1000 years to develop the Talmud; if it took Spanish Jewry over 500 years to develop Sephardic practices; and shtetl-Orthodoxy several hundreds of years to develop Ashkenazic Orthodox Yiddishkeit, why expect American Jewry, in not much more than 100 years, to work out what will undoubtedly become the characteristic set of American-Jewish practices of Judaism. After all,

discounting Sephardic Jews who disappeared not long after the Revolution, American Jewry is still young. Give them time, through long trial and error, to develop also.

Have patience; just keep that will-to-survive alive as best each of us can in his or her respective line.

As Dimont points out, it was only in lands where Jews enjoyed leisure, wealth, enlightenment, that new ways were worked out. Israel is too occupied and, I fear, always will be. There-

fore, let me quote from Dimont, adding a word of mine own:

In Jerusalem of old, it was written, "Out of Zion will go forth the Law, and the Word of God from Jerusalem". In the Diaspora of the Middle Ages, it was said, "Out of Spain will go forth the Law, and the Word of God from Germany".

In modern times, it seems to me, "From America will go forth the Law, and the Word of God from New York (or, maybe, Los Angeles?)"!