

A Call To The Campus Intellectual - Jews Only By Birth

based on a sermon delivered by Rabbi R.B. GITTEL-SOHN adapted and sponsored by DR. DAVID MONSON — Rabbi Beth Sholom Synagogue.

I learned that in such places as U of T, York, and other Ontario universities, there were Jews who hold themselves apart from the Jewish community.

These are the so-called Jewish intellectuals. Or, more accurately, the intellectuals — pseudo or real — who happen to spring from Jewish origins. They are to be found, in every center of Canadian and American academic life. Here in the Greater Toronto area they are identified chiefly with the U of T, with York and with the several private laboratories engaged in scientific investigation and research.

With only the fewest of encouraging exceptions — these men and women do not belong to a synagogue. They do not provide their children with any kind of Jewish education. Their names are not listed either as contributors, leaders, or even workers for the organized agencies of the Jewish community. They constitute a lost generation in contemporary Jewish life. What makes their defection too tragic to be accepted in quiet acquiescence is the undeniable truth that included in their number are some of the finest, sharpest, brightest minds of our time.

This sermon is deliberately intended for them. I shall appeal to them on three levels in my effort to persuade them that their estrangement from the Jewish community should be ended.

The first thing I would say to my un-Jewish intellectual friends is that the Jewish people needs them — the Jewish people past, present and future. Now — how is it possible to speak of a people in the past needing those who are alive today? What I have in mind is the unparalleled, immeasurable, almost unbelievable sacrifice and heroism exhibited by Jews through the centuries in their stubborn determination to remain Jews.

I would remind them of what Judaism has meant to Jews through more than thirty centuries of time. At least until the Hitler period, a relatively simple escape hatch was available for any Jew who wanted to avoid suffering. The door of conversion to Christianity was always open to him. All he had to do was give up the ghost, agree that Jewish survival wasn't worth the agony and pain it involved. At a cost only of surrendering his loyalty to the Jewish people and its faith, he could have purchased immunity and comfort for himself.

Judaism worth preserving

Yet very few Jews ever made the easy bargain. Nor was it just simple stubbornness which motivated them. It was rather a deep, profound, abiding conviction that Judaism was worth preserving; that it possessed something unique and precious which warranted even the most unspeakable kind of sacrifice in order that it be maintained.

Shouldn't that count for something today? Shouldn't Akiba count for something — risking his life eighteen centuries ago by gathering his students secretly to teach them Torah in stifling caves when Rome had forbidden such study at risk of life itself? Shouldn't the martyrs of nearly two millenia count for something — those who suffered and died on the stake, in torture chambers and crematoria, al kiddush ha-shem, for the sanctification of God's Name?

Shouldn't six million Jewish victims of Hitler count for something? Shouldn't those count who willingly gave their lives that the State of Israel might be established and defended? Just what kind of person is it who can with easy conscience thumb his nose at sacrifice such as this? Who can tell so many millions of martyrs that what they proudly died for isn't worth our effort to preserve? That, in essence, is what I mean when I say that Jewish people of the past need our intellectuals today.

When I add that the Jewish people of the present and the future need them no less, I have in mind something different, though even more important. I think I can understand what has estranged a certain number of Jewish intellectuals from their heritage. Judaism in some of its contemporary manifestations admittedly seems remote from modern life, but if there is one secret which explains the deep mystery of Jewish survival, it is the diligence of our brightest intellectuals in the past as they strove to coordinate Judaism and the secular world for the advantage and benefit of both. Time allows only two brief examples, though scores — perhaps hundreds — could easily be adduced.

As far as our records indicate, the most distin-

guished Jewish intellectual in the first century of the Common Era was a man named Philo Judaeus. The prevailing philosophic mood of his time was Platonic. With a mental acumen much more abundantly appreciated by succeeding generations than by his own, Philo reconciled Hellenism with the religious ideals of Judaism. He did not find it necessary to choose either Hellenism or Judaism to the total exclusion of the other. He used the great gifts of his mind to combine them, thus laying the groundwork for Judaism's encounter with Christianity far into the future.

My second example is Maimonides. In the twelfth century the dominant intellectual atmosphere was Aristotelian. Modern science, moreover, was just beginning to emerge. Maimonides embraced many disciplines: he was a rabbi, a theologian, a philosopher and a scientist. He was perhaps the most eminent physician in the world of his time. He too found it altogether unnecessary to choose among Judaism, philosophy or science, at a price of rejecting the others.

Precisely because he was a truly great intellectual, Maimonides was able to help Judaism develop and adjust, to adopt its values and principles without ceasing to be authentically itself, to make room within itself for every legitimate influence from Aristotle and from the scientific method. Who can doubt that Maimonides himself, Judaism in particular, and human culture at large, all benefited from the fact that this man remained a questing, practicing Jew.

In our time, the mood is no longer that of either Aristotle or Plato. The mood now is a combination of Einstein, Darwin and Freud. But the challenge in the twentieth century is exactly what it was in the first and the twelfth. This is a job which is especially dependent upon the intellectual. Here then is my first dimension of my approach to the un-Jewish intellectual: your people needs you!

Needed as a Jew

Of no importance, however, is the fact that the world needs you. The world needs you not merely as an individual, but specifically, precisely, as a Jew. Basic to this assertion is the premise that Judaism — properly interpreted and applied — encompasses a syndrome of emphases and insights which no other group or culture expresses in quite the same measure or way. It would require a whole series of articles to expand on this premise adequately. Let me just mention, with a bare minimum of comment, a few of the unique emphases of Judaism which the world needs and which it will obtain from us only if we survive in identifiable form. For what does our tradition stand — especially, uniquely?

First, that the heart of all reality is spiritual, not physical. It follows from this that if man is to be truly man, and not just the most complex of animals, his primary pursuit must be after truth, after beauty, after moral goodness — not just after pleasure and material wealth.

Second, there is a oneness in the sense that everything emanated from the same creative beginning and that the same chemical components and natural laws are operative throughout all existence — from the remotest reaches of outer space to the minutest molecule within my body. There is also a spiritual oneness which inextricably binds each person on earth to every other person, each nation or religion or race to all others.

Third, our noblest ethical aspirations, which derive from the very nature of reality itself, must be applied to every segment of life. There can be no asceticism, no withdrawal, no denial. All of man's experience is susceptible to sanctification. Life is to be divided, as Martin Buber put it, not into the sacred versus the profane, but into the sacred and the not-yet-sacred.

Fourth, every human being on this earth is my brother. The same ethic by which my family life should be governed must be extended to the stranger whose language I don't understand, whose mores may even be entirely beyond my comprehension. I who am descended from oppressed strangers must be forever

compassionate to all who are either strangers or oppressed.

Fifth, religion is not a separate compartment of life but is rather a precious thread woven into the fabric of both the national and the ethnic. Which means to say: whatever I do as political man or civic man or biological man must be influenced by what I am as religious man.

Sixth, our greatest need today, if humanity is to survive, is for a synthesis of the particular and the universal. We must learn to live as citizens of our respective nations, yet simultaneously as citizens of the world. No one is in a better position to succeed at this excruciatingly difficult task than are we. For on the world scene today only we Jews exist in part as a separate nation, living on a soil of its own, yet also as a universal people, scattered over most of the planet. In mankind's ineluctable, urgent, desperate pursuit of peace, we Jews constitute — whether we deliberately will it so or not — as we have in other contexts so many times in the past — an experimental human laboratory, testing for the whole human race concepts and ideals calculated to achieve salvation.

New Organization

So much, then, for our brief encapsulation of what Judaism offers to the world. I think I know the Question some of my intellectual friends would pose at this point. Can't we cherish and foster precisely these emphases without identification as Jews? The answer is no. What kind of reasonable sense does it make to select from a variety of other sources — synthetically, as it were — that which has grown indigenously and organically in our own source in Judaism? Isn't that almost like enjoying the physical appearance of one's wife by reflection, through a series of photographs, each showing one perspective or angle, instead of living with her face-to-face, reveling in her beauty firsthand, alive?

Why go to the florist shop each day to purchase cut flowers while neglecting one's own bounteous garden? Why live only on the accumulated capital of Judaism without making further investments, in order that it may offer the world additional and perhaps even greater blessings in the future?

If I told you my un-Jewish intellectual that a new organization was to be formed, dedicated to exactly the six ideals briefly summarized a moment ago, if I invited you to join such an organization in order that, together with others of similar intention and hope, you might encourage and promote these emphases, you would eagerly accept, would you not? Yet you deliberately scorn the great historic group already in existence for this purpose and into which you yourself were born. Thus you deny to the whole of humanity continued creative enrichment through ideals which you profess to cherish.

Yes, one or another of these values may be found in other cultures. But only Judaism originated all of them. Only Judaism holds them bound closely together in an integrated, organic whole. And Judaism can best develop them as a pattern for the future. That's why the world needs you as a Jew.

I said at the beginning that there were three dimensions in which I wanted to address my indifferent friends. In addition to the fact that your people need you, and the world needs you to be identifiably Jewish, you, my intellectual friends need to be Jewish yourselves. You need it for the sake of your own fulfillment. You need it to attain happiness and self-respect. If you are as balanced emotionally as you are gifted mentally, you know that self-denial is not the road to happiness, neither for the individual as such, nor for the renegade from an honourable historic people. I am what I am — as a Canadian as a Jew, as a man. To the degree that I acknowledge who I really am and struggle to perfect myself as such, my life succeeds. In the measure that I attempt to deny myself, I become ludicrous in the eyes of others and more than slightly cheap in my own sight.

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