

MUST THE JEW SUPPORT INJUSTICE IN ORDER TO BE ACCEPTED?

Short days ago a tall man with a scar on his face stopped at a garage station several blocks from the Hebrew Benevolent Congregation on Peachtree Street in Atlanta, Georgia. In the early hours of the following morning, several hours before Sunday School, the wall in the auditorium of the Temple was devastated by a dynamite blast. Only a few months before, a Temple in Miami, in Nashville, and in Jacksonville had been dynamited. Jews throughout the South were becoming more and more concerned. Some of them were saying, "Maybe our Rabbis shouldn't talk about integration. Maybe we shouldn't support the Negro in his search for civil rights."

The bombings have highlighted an age-old question which Jews have always had to face. Shall the Jew support injustice in order to be accepted by our Christian neighbors? An editorial in the Richmond, Virginia "News-Leader" took just this approach to the subject. The editorial, which appeared a few weeks ago, proclaimed that as long as the Jews supported the Negroes in their drive to enter white schools, just so long could the Jews anticipate with certainty the animosity of their white Christian neighbors. The editorial openly declared that Jewish agencies disseminating pro-integration literature were indeed enemies of the Jewish people, for they were directly responsible for growing anti-semitism.

The editorial in this large southern newspaper, apparently was the official viewpoint of the Byrd machine which controls the state of Virginia. The machine was committed to closing the public schools should the Negroes seek to enter, and it had rallied almost the entire white community behind it. Thus the newspaper expressed the opinion of the state's Senators, the Governor, and the majority of its Christian citizenry.

It was shortly after this editorial appeared that the Temple in Atlanta was bombed, and it would seem on the face of things that the white Christians of the South were determined to make life miserable for the Jews, so long as they showed sympathy for the Negro. Yet, the very violence which seemed to underscore this view, has caused a sharp reversal in Christian thinking. As Joseph in Egypt said to his errant brothers who had placed him in slavery, "You meant it for evil, but God meant it for good."

Amongst the factors which twisted the effect of the bombing "for good" are these. In the first place, the bombers selected a congregation which was the oldest and most respected congregation in Atlanta. Its leaders were Atlanta's leaders, known for their conservative views and their love of the south. Its Rabbi had taken a moderate stand on the Negro question. Further, the bomb blast occurred only a few blocks from the Governor's mansion, and windows were broken in that building. The bombers had made a crucial error. They could have selected a more insignificant synagogue building, or a congregation with less prestige. But now the Mayor of Atlanta, himself, was forced to come out with this statement, "Whether they like it or not," he declared, "every rabble-rousing politician is the godfather of the cross-burners and the dynamiters." Governor Griffin said, "I am inclined to believe the act was committed by a ring or conspiracy of some kind designed to bring discredit on our great state and our people during a very troublesome era. We will not have this sort of thing in Georgia."

Instead of weakening the cause of the Jews, the bombing seems to have strengthened our hand immeasurably. The Christians who have blamed the Negro problems on the Jews now are awakening to the fact that even if the Jews were destroyed, the Negro problem would remain, and they are learning that violence, in the end, solves nothing. The Atlanta Constitution, one of the nation's great newspapers, had this story on October 13, "Dynamite in great quantity Sunday ripped a beautiful Temple of worship in Atlanta. It followed hard on the heels of a like destruction of a handsome high school in Clinton, Tennessee....Let us face the facts. This is a harvest. It is the crop of things sown. It is the harvest of defiance of courts and the encouragement of citizens to defy law on the part of many southern politicians.... It is not possible to preach lawlessness and restrict it.... To be sure, none said, 'Go bomb a Jewish Temple or a school'.... But let it be understood that when leadership in high places in any degree fails to support constitutional authority, it opens the gates to all those who wish to take law into their hands."

The article sought to make it quite clear that so long as Christians preach hate against anyone, they will themselves suffer in the end. The article stated, "This, too, is a harvest of those so-called Christian ministers who have chosen to preach hate instead of compassion. Let them now find pious words and raise their hands in deploring the bombing of a synagogue.... You do not preach and encourage hatred for the Negro and hope to restrict it to that field. It is an old, old story. It is repeated over and over again in history. When the wolves of hate are loosed on one people, then no one is safe."

Many Jews were so frightened by the Atlanta bombing, that they increased their efforts to restrain all Jewish effort in behalf of the Negroes. But the truth is that the pendulum seems now to be swinging the other way. Having witnessed the logical result of their hate-preaching, many Christians are drawing back in horror from the spectacle of violence, and are re-directing their thinking. In Virginia, for example, the Byrd machine closed the schools in my home town of Norfolk, when the court ordered several schools to integrate. Now the white citizenry, after several weeks of closed schools, are holding mass meetings and petitioning the state government to re-open the schools, integrated or not. The teachers of Virginia have petitioned the United States government to force the state to re-open the schools. Thus, major battles in the integration fight are being fought and won at this very moment, and this is certainly no time for the Jew to withdraw from the battle in fear.

Dr. Eisendrath, the national President of our Reform movement, sent a telegram to President Eisenhower immediately after the Atlanta bombing in which he stated, "....this kind of violence is, ---the inevitable result of the climate of hysteria which --- opportunistic politicians have cynically promoted. Without this climate of hysteria and the acquiescent silence of so-called respectable and even prominent citizens and public officials, these few criminals and hoodlums could not function and work their violence. THEY SEEK TO INTIMIDATE THE VOICES OF REASON AND RELIGION, of moderation and conscience. Their voices must not be intimidated and silenced.

As for me, let me say that one cannot be a Jew and keep silent where injustice is concerned. Those who would have us surrender our ethics are those who would have us cease to be Jews. And let no one deceive himself that silence on our part will bring love from our Christian brothers. If the Christian does not love us when we are true to the highest ideals of our respective faiths, then surely he will not love us if we are less than just and less than forthright. The Jew has no choice, bombings or not, but to teach and preach democracy and righteousness. Thank God, most Jews have attained to that conclusion. Let us pray that most Christians will come to realize that they, too, have no other alternative. They, too, must teach and preach love and justice, or cease to be Christians.

The goal and prayer of all thinking men in this most serious national crisis is beautifully described by the Atlanta Constitution which, on the day after the bombing, published an article under the title, "MEMO TO A DYNAMITER." The article concludes with this paragraph, "Walking back through - - - the debris and through a shattered door into the sanctuary of the bombed Temple, it would have been interesting (for the dynamiters) to ascend behind the great golden ark and read the page at which the prayer book was open when the dynamite exploded. You had to brush aside the plaster dust in order to read the words very well, but they said this:

'Oh, God, may all created in Thine image recognize that they are brethren, so that one in spirit and one in fellowship, they may be forever united before Thee.'