

INTRODUCTION

I - WE HAVE NOT MERELY SUFFERED

One of the great Jewish thinkers of the previous century, Pinsker, once said, "The Jews are the chosen people - of the world's hatred." Many of us probably had a similar thought when recently we saw a TV movie made from the films of the German concentration camps. Several of you came to me and said, "Rabbi, when I saw the Jews being herded into mass graves, I couldn't help but wonder why we should continue to be Jews, when we are the object of such hatred and when we are constantly attacked?" The question is one which has to be answered.

First, let me say that while it is true that the Jews have suffered intensely in many ages, it is not true that we have only suffered. There have been long centuries in Jewish history when we lived reasonably secure and unthreatened lives. We lived at least as well as most of our neighboring peoples. The Biblical period of our history stretches from about 1750 BCE to about 300 BCE. During these 1400 years we lived, for the most part, in greater security than most of the peoples about us. True, we spent a fraction of that time in slavery to Egypt, and during the latter centuries of that period, our society gradually deteriorated; but for one thousand years, five times the span of the existence of the United States, we lived well, compared to most of our neighbors.

Even while we were in exile in Babylonia for another fifteen hundred years, we existed as a semi-independent community within the larger Babylonian community, and we did not experience religious persecution there except in the earliest days of the exile. In Spain, from about 700 to 1400, we occupied some of the highest positions in the government. Many of the great philosophers, poets and physicians of the Spain of this period were Jews. In spite of some well-defined anti-semitism in America, Jews have lived in relative ease here for over a hundred years. This is substantially true of Jewish communities which have existed in South America and in South Africa for some time. The greatest difficulties the Jews have experienced have been in Europe, but this is only one of the many continents where we have established ourselves. We should not belittle the existing danger of ignorance and prejudice to Jews, but it is likewise incorrect to say that to be a Jew is to belong to a people that has always been hunted and hated.

II - WE HAVE SURVIVED - THEREFORE WE FACE
THE DANGER OF LIVING

Secondly, it is important to note that the Jews have suffered longer than other peoples precisely because they have existed longer than other peoples. Shortly after World War II, I happened to hear a Professor of Christian Religion at Princeton University address a Christian worship service, and he said this, "The greatest proof of the existence of God, is the continued existence of the Jewish people." To this teacher of Christianity, the very endurance of the Jewish people was in itself a miracle that was not intellectually conceivable. Because of our existence, his faith in God was buttressed.

On the other hand, there have been many peoples throughout human history who have suffered grievously. Many of these peoples have been completely erased. Their memory is scarcely recorded. The Assyrians afflicted the Israelites, but so they afflicted the Philistines. The Babylonians exiled the Judeans, but they did the same to the Moabites and to the Edomites. The Philistines and the Moabites and the Edomites no longer suffer today. They are non-existent. The Jews have suffered longer than these peoples, but that is because the Jews alone have managed to survive.

Had the Jews not been victorious over suffering, had they not had long periods of prosperity and revitalization, they would have ceased to exist. But since they continued to thrive, since they had the virility to travel far and wide, and since they were strangers and a minority wherever they went, they exposed themselves to the possibility of suffering. To be alive and adventurous is to invite the possibility of suffering.

We have suffered so much because for over 4,000 years we have exposed ourselves to the problems of living. The United States is a few hundred years old, yet America has suffered through several major wars, including a bloody civil war. The Christian professor was right - the existence of the Jew today, virile and intelligent, is a miracle, and a testimony to the fact that the Jew has a secret of life which has enabled him to survive. As someone once wrote, "The bush of Moses, surrounded by flames, has ever burned, without being consumed."

III MISSION

There are some Jews who say, even if we grant all this, we must admit that the Jew has served his purpose. It is therefore foolish for us to expose ourselves to further suffering. Those who hold this view recommend that we be absorbed into the majority faith and disappear. They argue that Christianity has absorbed the ethics of Judaism and the larger number of Christians are now doing the job that Jews once did alone. In this connection, it is interesting that one of the outstanding Christian theologians of modern times, Reinhold Niebuhr, should say, "The purpose of the Jew in modern times is to keep Christians from becoming heretics."

The old purpose of the Jew was to carry Torah, the moral law to the pagan nations. Now the Reverend Niebuhr says our task is to be a moral and spiritual elite in a sympathetic culture. In the past, when Jews lived among poorly educated and crude-mannered peoples, it was easy for Jews to see their superiority, and, therefore, they held on tenaciously to their separatism and independence. Today, however, with the raising of the level of manners and culture around us, we do not feel this difference so acutely, and we wonder if the game of being different is worth the reward.

(A)

Since Reinhold Niebuhr is a bold advocate of Christianity, we wonder why, he as a Christian, yet feels that Jews have an important role to play in modern times. Niebuhr has given us the answer. First of all, Christianity has not completely liberated itself from its pagan trappings. Many Christian religious teachers still speak of God in human form and in statue form. True monotheism, true worship of God in an invisible but united form is yet in the singular possessions of the Jews. Niebuhr thinks that Christians have to learn to picture God less in human form and to pray less to the Holy Saints and to think more of the universal and invisible God.

(B)

Further, Niebuhr has taught that the Jews by experience and training are still better suited for charity and social justice than the Christians.. The Biblical text tells us that God commanded the Hebrews, "Ye shall treat the stranger as thy brother, for ye knoweth the heart of a stranger, seeing ye were strangers in the land of Egypt." The very experience of suffering of the Hebrews, relatively denied to the Christian, enables the Jew to know the heart of the stranger, to know the heart of the persecuted minority, to share the pain of the outcast; and so by our historical experience, we are especially fit to lead the way in America in the battle for social justice and in the organization of charity. The Reverend Niebuhr, one of America's leading Christians, contends that whenever he organizes a drive for charity, the response from Jews is proportionately overwhelming.

(C)

We return now to Dr. Niebuhr's dictum that the function of the Jew in modern times is to keep the Christian from becoming a heretic. Included in this statement is the feeling that Christianity has a tendency to emphasize abstract faith and other-worldliness while Judaism has always stressed conduct and this-worldliness. Christianity tends to stress the world to come while Judaism stresses the compulsion to correct the injustices that exist in this world. It is this flight from reality on the part of Christians that the Christian theologian Niebuhr condemns. He would like to see his religion closer to the mother religion in this respect.

It is unfortunately, all too true, that generally speaking, Jews have a greater drive towards improving the world in which we live than do Christians. In my home town of Norfolk, Virginia, the Southern Conference for Human Welfare, an organization devoted to improving conditions in the south was completely dominated by Jews. When the Negro appealed to the Supreme Court to end discrimination in the public school system, the lawyers who helped prepare the legal brief were not Christians but Jews. Time and again I have tried to join liberal-oriented organizations which have had to say, "Look we have too many Jews already, let us try to attract a few Christians before you join. These recitations of the facts in our American environment are not said by way of boasting; they are an unfortunate reality. The truth is that Jews are usually condemned for their earnestness and their idealism. In our own community, Jack Gordon, running for election to the Dade County School Board, is the target of a vicious campaign condemning him because he is a member of several liberal organizations, including the American Jewish Congress. The Congress is one of the sponsors of the current court case testing religion in the public schools. A group of clergymen have distributed a pamphlet calling the American Jewish Congress a radical organization with the inference that it is pro-Communist. The pamphlet calls for the defeat of Mr. Gordon in favor of a Republican named Atkinson. The front page of this pamphlet has a picture of a Bible and the United States flag,

insinuating that a vote for Gordon is unAmerican and anti-God. Of course, the American Jewish Congress is completely free of Communists. Indeed, Rabbi Kronish of Miami Beach and Rabbi Rosenberg, recently of Beth David, have been its major local supporters. Unfortunately, the opinion of Dr. Niebuhr in support of organized Jewish idealism, seems to clash strongly with the opinion of less informed and less educated Christians.

IV REASONS FOR HITLER'S OPPOSITION TO JEW

It was the European historian, Renan, who said, "The enemies of Jewry are for the most part enemies of the modern spirit." By the modern spirit, Renan meant the liberal, democratic spirit than sweeping the Western world. Hitler attacked the Jews not merely because they were an easy target, because they were a minority, but because they represented the most solid group opposing his goals. Thomas Mann, the great anti-Nazi German, novelist, said in 1937, "Jews...form a secretly corrective element against our passions..When anti-Semitism breaks out in Europe, it betokens that the people there feel ill at ease under the Jewish mind. Then the Jews have to suffer. But they will suffer--and survive. And we may all be certain that their strong sense of this world, their inborn idealism, will play an important part in the upbuilding of a new humanity, struggling slowly out of its crises."

V TO BE A JEW IS A DESTINY

To be a Jew is to be born with a destiny, a great destiny, the destiny of serving as a stimulant to the world. The world is not yet so near to justice and to peace that our destiny has been fulfilled. OTHER MEN HAVE BORROWED OUR SLOGANS, BUT THEY HAVE NOT GENERATED OUR PASSION NOR DEVELOPED OUR SENSE OF THE MORAL IMPERATIVE. We are apparently destined to be the eternal critic of the majority, thus helping to keep the majority true to its better ideals. Certainly, this is what Niebuhr meant when he said the function of the Jew is to keep the Christian from becoming a heretic. We have to remind the Christian of what makes him a Christian, of what makes his religion different from the religions not derived from Judaism.

Unfortunately, however, the performance of this task is not easy nor is it without grave dangers. When Protestants are reminded that the separation of church and state was originally a Protestant doctrine, they resent it. And when Christians are advised that depriving the Negro of equal rights is against our common religious teaching, they equate their advisors with the object of their hatred. Unfortunately, most majorities believe in their prejudices with a perfect faith, and if the critic does not wish to be swallowed up, he must be both cautious and humble. Indeed, if the critic does not play his role with understanding and restraint, he invites disaster for himself and defeat for his cause.

So many people go throughout life searching for a purpose. The Jew does not have this problem. His purpose is built-in. Because he is a member of a minority which has its roots in an ethically oriented history of thousands of years, he carries with him, IF HE IS A KNOWLEDGEABLE JEW, information about prospective dangers to society. He can see the impending disaster long before anyone else does. He can feel catastrophe in his bones. And it is his destiny to cry out when others are indifferent and unaware. WHEN HE CRIES OUT, HOWEVER, HE MUST BE CAREFUL NOT TO SEEM TO BE SELF-RIGHTEOUS, and he must be tolerant. He must be tolerant of the lack of sensitivity of those who have not suffered as much as he has. In other words, if the Jew wishes the projects in which he is concerned to succeed, he must understand that it is difficult to be a member of the majority and thus to be denied the experiences of suffering which make one concerned about the problems of others.

The great resistance of the Jew to tyranny wherever it raises its head, is characterized in one of our Biblical stories which occurs during the Babylonian period. Three members of the Persian or Babylonian Jewish community were sentenced to the fiery furnace by Nebuchadnezzar, the king, because they would not bow down to his gods. The irate king, after sentencing the men to the furnace, asked, "Who is this God that can deliver you out of my hand?" The men heroically answered, "WE HAVE NO NEED TO ANSWER THEE IN THIS MATTER. IF HE WILLS, OUR GOD WHOM WE SERVE IS ABLE TO DELIVER US FROM THE BURNING FURNACE.....BUT IF NOT, BE IT KNOWN UNTO THEE, O KING, THAT WE WILL STILL NOT SERVE THY GOD...!" In the phrase, "BUT IF NOT", we hear the truly heroic note. These Jews hoped to be saved by their God, but even if they were not saved, they knew that the gods of the Babylonians were false gods unworthy of being worshipped by intelligent people. We Jews, through our training and history, have a sensitivity to the truth and falsity in a public policy whether it be of a religious or of a political nature, and even if we suffer by disobeying it, we have refused to become a party to ignorance and to prejudice. This is what made the Jew so distasteful to Hitler, and this is what makes us disliked by the prejudiced Christians. We will not surrender, even if our God does not save us in the dramatic moment, because we know enough to know when the others are wrong.

Thus far, we have spoken of the Jews as an historic unit. We know, of course, that not all Jews in every age, and certainly not all Jews today are cast in this heroic mould. If we are candid, we must admit that most Jews today fall shockingly short of this grand image. The Jew who is conscious of his destiny and who prepares himself to face it with restraint and understanding is heroic in his patient resisting, but the Jew who is not aware of his destiny and who does not study to prepare himself for the problems he must face, invites suffering. We all know many Jews who defiantly want to challenge all of their tormentors, real and imagined, but most of these Jews are without knowledge, and there is a note of tragedy in their defiance. On the other hand, we all know Jews who actually would like to be assimilated but find it too difficult to do so. Very few indeed are the Jews who are both proud and knowing.

It is understandable that anyone who is a Jew would have moments when he would ask, "Why go on resisting? Is the game really worth the candle? What is it all about?" These thoughts are natural and forgivable. Unfortunately, however, too many of us stop questioning and thinking just at this point. Instead of studying to find the answers to these questions in our history, we become enslaved Jews, "unwilling wearers of the badge." Or we become "High Holiday Jews", peeking into the synagogue door once a year to see if the queer folk are still at home. Or we become "Bar Mitzvah Jews," fulfilling the social requirements of Bar Mitzvah and then running from the synagogue as if the Nazis were there instead of our closest friends. Those who are not fully aware of the Jewish role in today's world, pinch every dollar they spend in support of Jewish institutions.

The real tragedy in the Jewish community today is not that we are still the target for prejudice, but that the Jews, generally speaking, don't understand their mission. If the average Jew today constitutes the moral and spiritual elite of our society, I say, "God help us; we are undone." The truth is that never before in the history of our people, except perhaps in the pre-Hitlerian Germany, have the Jews tried so much to be like their non-Jewish neighbors instead of preserving the essential Jewish differences. THESE DIFFERENCES ARE ROOTED IN LEARNING, in the study of Jewish and human history. They are rooted in the kind of learning that comes from identification with those who suffer. It is the learning and the experience of the Jew that in the past has impelled him to moral action and to universal concern. Today's Jew is too busy imitating his neighbors to involve himself in the historic experience of his people.

The Jews in Israel have found a way to revitalize their spirit. They are rebuilding a land. They are actively projecting ideals of compassion and justice, participating in an in-gathering of peoples comparable only to the American in-gathering in America's more dynamic days. We Jews in America have a task at least as great, but more difficult of accomplishment. We have to serve as the vanguard of the humanitarian spirit in the world's greatest nation. How can we do it, if we do not prepare ourselves by study and action to play this role? Some Christian leaders, a very few of them, it is true, admit that there is a group of people equipped by historical experience and intellectual background to play the role - a role that is vital to the buttressing of the majority religion and to the saving of America. But are the assumptions of these generously minded Christians correct when applied to the generation of Jews of which we are a part?

Someone once wrote, the Jews are "a people who can't sleep themselves and won't let anybody else sleep." The truth is we sleep too well today, and we are awakening no one else. Everybody sleeps while the western world slowly corrodes in its moral fiber, and while peace goes begging. How wonderful it would be if American Jews could rise to the challenge that confronts them, if we could fulfill the admonition of the ancient prophets that we be an "oir l'goyim, a light unto the peoples." How wonderful it would be if we could fulfill the expectations that some gifted Christians have of us. Wrote Jacques Maritain, in his book, "A Christian Looks At The Jewish Problem," Israel which is not of the world is to be found at the very heart of the world's structure, stimulating it, exasperating it, moving it. Like an alien body, like an activating ferment injected into the mass, it gives the world no peace, it bars slumber, it teaches the world to be discontented and restless - as long as the world has not God."

I wonder if he is talking about us?