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*Should a Rabbi
Speak Out
On Current Issues?*

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MINISTER vs. HIS PARISHIONERS

About ten years ago, I had a good friend who was a Minister in the pulpit of a Long Island Church. My friend was an honest and sincere person, and, on occasion, he would speak out on special issues which, in his opinion, were of especially vital concern. His views were not popular with some members of his congregation, who took the Minister to task at a meeting of the Church Board. Said the leaders of the opposition, "We come to Church to hear the Gospel. We're not interested in social problems. We think the Minister should talk only about the Bible."

THE SPECIAL PROBLEM OF MINISTERS

Generally speaking, Christian Ministers have much more of a problem with their boards than do Rabbis on this kind of issue. The problem in Christianity is that Luther, the founder of Protestantism, insisted that it is not "good works" which save a man, but "faith." To this day, Protestantism in America is sharply divided on this question. Perhaps, the majority of Protestant Churches take the fundamentalist position that faith is the chief thing and works are secondary, but there is a growing and strong Protestant minority which insists that the ultimate test of a man's religious conviction is in what he *does*, not in what he claims to believe.

JUDAISM EMPHASIZES "WORKS"

There is no mistaking the different emphasis that Judaism gives in this theological debate. The matter is summarized in the Talmud by one Rabbi who taught, "The world stands on three things: on knowledge of the religious law, on worship, and on deeds of love." First, taught the Rabbis, we must have knowledge of God, but, ultimately, we must know how to relate to our fellow men. For Jews, the basic test of religiosity has always been *action, performance*.

One Hasidic Rabbi felt so strongly about the matter that he declared, "He who says that religious teaching is one thing and that practical problems of society are another — has no part in the world to come." We might not want to deny a person with this view a part in the world to come, but, as Jews, we have to insist that religious teaching has very much to do with the practical problems of life. Some Talmudic teachers taught that religious learning which is not applied to societal problems can lead to an inner corruption. Even with its great emphasis on learning, Judaism has been very careful to warn against the dangers of the ivory tower. Learning has no meaning unless it is used in the service of man.

STATEMENT OF THE CENTRAL CONFERENCE OF AMERICAN RABBIS, JUNE, 1964

At the June Convention of the Central Conference of American Rabbis in 1964, the Rabbis adopted a statement on "The Rabbi and the Political Process." The statement reads as follows: "Since the inception of the C. C. A. R., individual members of this conference have participated actively in the political process . . . we hereby reaffirm the Rabbi's right and *obligation* to exercise political responsibility as a citizen and as a moral teacher.

"Politics is the primary means through which a democratic society determines its nature and purposes . . . The Rabbi who seeks to affect the character of his congregants must seek to affect the character of the environment in which they live.

"The Rabbi derives his authority to speak and act on public issues, not from his congregation, but from the heritage of Judaism, from the dictates of his conscience, and from the conviction that religion must ever maintain a critical perspective of society.

" . . . In general, the Rabbi addresses himself to issues and not to personalities or to partisan politics, but at crucial times in the life of a community or the nation, and when in his judgment it is deemed necessary, the Rabbi should be free to take a public position in political campaigns . . ."

THE AUTHORITY OF THE TRADITION

The statement of the C. C. A. R. contends that the Rabbi gains his authority and obligation to speak out on social issues from the Jewish tradition, from the "Heritage of Judaism." Let us look briefly now at that heritage. The greatest hero in our Bible is a man named Moses. Is Moses presented as a pious preacher of general slogans? Is he pictured as a man removed from the suffering of the people, who from the safety of his academic heights, advises indifference to social evils? *Hardly!*

Moses is described as a man who saw a taskmaster beating a slave, and was unable to restrain himself from physically attacking the taskmaster. Moses, then, ran away to the desert to escape punishment by the Egyptian police, but he could not hide in the safety of the desert for long. While tending sheep, he saw a bush burning without being consumed, and he heard a voice which said, "Go back and join yourself to your people."* There was nothing unpolitical about Moses. He bucked a Pharaoh and his whole political machine. When he had succeeded in leading the Hebrews to physical freedom, Moses,

*A paraphrase of the Exodus incident.

then set up an entirely new political structure for a new nation. There is nothing more political than the creation of new laws. If you read the Torah you will find that the laws there are not merely ritualistic; they are also economic, social, and political. The ancient Hebrews did not divide life up into compartments of religion and politics. *The morality of one had to permeate the other.*

The Rabbis of the Talmud had functions much different from the Rabbis of today. In the Talmudic period which bridges, roughly the period from the Fourth Century B. C. E. to about 800 B. C. E., the Rabbis were religious lawyers. They administered and interpreted the laws of the Bible and the Talmud. In every land in which the Jews lived, they had their own courts. The law that the modern lawyer calls "torts" or "negligence" was administered by the Rabbis in those days.

THE MODERN EMPHASIS

In modern times, a Rabbi is not a religious lawyer. *He is a teacher.* In America we like to say that the state does not control religion, nor do religious functionaries operate within the framework of the state. Nevertheless, we do not teach in America that the state is of no concern to religious leaders. Since the state operates at almost every level of existence, since it controls, at least partially, matters of war and peace, matters of justice and charity, it is inevitable that those with religious concern be also concerned about who controls the state and to what end. Synagogue groups in America have established national committees on justice and peace, but we are not alone in this respect. The Episcopal Church, The Catholic Church, The Methodist Church, and many others, have like institutions. These national committees dispense information down to the local level and encourage the development of attitudes consistent with the moral ideals of the Church or Synagogue. Some Ministers and Rabbis seek merely to be academic teachers safely protected by their ivory tower. Other Ministers and Rabbis come out of the tower into the sunlight, yes, and into the hurricanes of practical problems. It is the latter who are more true to our *religious heritage.*

THE PROBLEM IN GERMANY

Some few of us still remember what happened in Germany 25 or 30 years ago. There was much politicking in Germany, and much injustice, but the clergy were silent. There were thousands of Churches in Germany, but there were few voices raised against

the developing mania which localized itself in Hitler. Even from safer vantage points, as in America, clergymen, yes, even Rabbis, made only mild protests against the persecution of minorities in Germany. Hitler was a politician. Never forget it. Yet few of us in retrospect would say now that the Ministers and Rabbis ought to have kept quiet about him. In considering this extreme product of the political world, we can all see that in some cases, at least, the clergyman who does not cry out with all of his crying, betrays, by his silence, not only his religious heritage, not only mankind, but God as well.

I once heard a Chinese lady say, "How can you let men wander aimlessly in the desert, when you know of the oasis?" Any person, even a Minister or Rabbi, who sees people wandering aimlessly, who sees that people are about to do something to hurt themselves, has the responsibility to cry out and to point to a better direction.

THE NEED FOR RESTRAINT

Of course, there is a need for the Rabbi to exercise restraint. When tweedle-dee is running for election against tweedle-dum, it is idle of the Rabbi to support either candidate. The Rabbi should not participate in politics merely for the sake of taking sides. There must be a clear cut moral issue involved before a clergyman should make his influence felt. But, if in his judgment and on the basis of his experience, there is a compelling need to speak, then, he has to speak. He has no choice.

When a Rabbi speaks, *he does not speak for his congregation*. He speaks for himself alone. In all fairness, he has to encourage each member of his congregation to make his own political choice. On the other hand, if the Rabbi surrenders his own right to make a choice and to talk about that choice in time of need, then, he is untrue to the tradition of which he is a part.

THE SPECIAL OBLIGATION OF THE REFORM RABBI

The Reform Rabbi has even more of an obligation to speak out in time of political crisis than the Orthodox Rabbi. The latter tends to emphasize the importance of observing rituals and can possibly argue that you can be a good Jew if you observe the rituals. I don't think he would stop at this. The Reform Jew claims that the ethical life is the essence of religiosity, but you cannot live the ethical life in a society controlled by those whose definition of freedom and of justice sharply differs from your own.

The Jew has been so much at home in America only because American Democracy has been built on the foundations of the Biblical tradition. If American Democracy is diverted into new and different channels, it may be that times will be not so good for the Jew. Frankly, when I see the long-time anti-semites lining up to support a certain candidate for political office, I become concerned; when I hear so much talk about freedom that leaves out 15 million dark skinned Americans, I become concerned; and when I hear so much talk about charity that leaves out the poor, I become suspicious. Would you have me keep silent if all that I know compels me to speak out? I hardly think so.

We in Reform Judaism claim that we are the modern representatives of the Judaism of the Prophets. 2800 years ago the Prophet Amos dared to go to the sanctuary operated by King Jereboam of Israel, there to announce that God would destroy the headstrong King. Amaziah, the High Priest, came to Amos and ordered him to leave the King's property. Implied in the order was a profound threat. The Prophet answered, "I do not earn my living through prophecy. I am a herdsman and farmer. I am here because God has sent me. Therefore, I have no choice but to speak out."**

Now, I am certainly not a prophet, nor am I the son of a prophet, but I *am the bearer of the tradition of Amos*. I am not a Rabbi merely because I earn my living in this way. (There are other jobs that I could take and hold.) If I speak out in a time when emotions run high and tempers are short, it is not to take sides with some of you and against others of you. I speak out because I cannot be silent and retain my self-respect in the post which you have entrusted to me.

**This is a paraphrase of Amos 7:10 ff.