

"IF I AM NOT FOR MYSELF, WHO IS FOR ME?"

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The Universalistic in Judaism - On Rosh Hashonah we reviewed the fact that God reveals himself sometimes in the call to serve others. In the story of Moses and the burning bush we learned that God promises Moses nothing for himself personally. The reward Moses is to receive for leading the Hebrews to freedom will be merely incidental to his performing his duty.

You will recall that in this situation, Moses had escaped from the Egyptians and was enjoying his safety in the desert amongst the Midianites. Part of the moral in this incident in the life of Moses is that a man cannot think only of himself. This is certainly a dominant theme in Judaism; yet it is not the only theme.

Here in our Sanctuary, inscribed on the window which is fourth from your left, there is a teaching of Rabbi Hillel, perhaps the greatest of the Talmudic Rabbis. Hillel taught, "If I am for myself alone, I am as nothing". But as a preface to this teaching, Hillel said, "If I am not for myself, who will be for me?" Hillel was wise enough to know that if a person did not seek his own well-being, he would not be in a position to serve others. Actually, taught Hillel, the two things, serving oneself and serving others, are bound together.

I am told that in the Atlanta office of the NAACP, there is a large sign with the teaching of Hillel which begins, "If I am not for myself, who will be for me?" Certainly, the problem of the American Negro is that he has lacked self-respect. Anyone who studies the history of the Negro in America has to admit that, among other reasons, he has remained backward because he has merely bowed his head and has accepted the white man's definition of the black man. Perhaps the Negro had little other choice in the south than to bow low, but when a man kneels too long, he forgets how to stand erect.

For long centuries in Europe, the Jew was in much the same position as that <sup>in</sup> which the American Negro has found himself for the last 150 years. Of course, the European Jew had certain advantages over the Negro of today. We Jews carried with us a heritage of learning, and we were able to create, wherever we went, a sub-culture which was loftier than the ruling culture into which we were cast. Nonetheless, in many matters, circumstances forced us to bow our heads so that the winds of hostility and blind force might pass over us as easily as possible. One of the greatest experiments in pacifism in all human history has been attempted by the Jewish



people as a whole. Who can tell if the islands of Jews scattered throughout Europe would have survived if the Jews had been more militant? It is possible that their pacifism is a main reason for their survival, a brilliant maneuver executed upon a stronger foe who seemed to lose his appetite for attacking Jews after some uncontested victories.

Pacifism worked well for the Jews of Europe until recent times. Until Hitler's day, the Jews lost many battles but few wars. When the shrieks and screams of the pogrom died away, a few Jews, a few hundred, a few thousand, were no longer among the living, but the Jewish community went on its way, and multiplied, and in many situations prospered better than their non-Jewish neighbors. So the Jews endured for thousands of years. It is indeed a miracle of patience. Only a people who deeply believed in the purpose of its existence could have retained its identity and character through this kind of repeated experience.

Shortly before the advent of Hitler, the Jews of Germany tried another kind of tactical maneuver. They chose to go over to the other side, to assimilate. The German Jews became the foremost exponents of the new German enlightenment in the late 19th century. In their homes, parties were held for the giants of philosophy and for the devotees of music and art. The Jews joined the vanguard of the New Germany. They willingly surrendered their relationship to the Jewish people in order to help fashion the new day dawning in Germany. It is sad, indeed, when people suffer for that in which they believe, but it is far more tragic when people suffer for something they have already surrendered. Many of the Jews of Germany had chosen not to be Jews. They had surrendered the name, the customs, the beliefs of Jews. They were Christians in every respect, but Hitler sought them out. and gave them back a name they had sought to avoid.

It is not a surprise, then, that the seed for Jewish survival was planted not in the intellectual Jewish community of Germany, but in Eastern Europe. It was there that the active Zionists arose, and it was from amongst the clearly identified Jews that leaders like Ben Gurion emerged. Ben Gurion, and those who believed as he did in the necessity of reestablishing the Jewish state, had as their banner the teaching of Hillel, "If I am not for myself, who will be for me?"

Certainly, there were few friends amongst the Poles, the Russians, and the Germans. The friendliness of the Danes and the Dutch was in sharp contrast to the wall of silence that met the appeals of Jews in other European countries. In the book, "The Last of the Just", Andre Schwarzbart describes a scene which took place just before Hitler came to power. The Nazis had cornered a group of Jews after services on Yom Kippur in an alley-way. Scores of Germans watched the scene from their windows looking down on the alley. (Paragraph continued on page three).



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If the on-lookers had protested, it is distinctly possible that the Jews could have been saved. The on-lookers did not protest, however. Some few were silent, because they approved of what the Nazis were doing. Some of the on-lookers were silent out of fear. Whatever the reason, the Nazis, who were in the minority at that time, were left to deal as they wished with the Jews in the alley.

It is unfortunately true that most human beings will take the easy way out. They will not stick out their neck to help others. So the Jews were alone in that alley-way, although there were many spectators.

Some of you will recall the stories of the ships laden with Jewish refugees which came to ports in Israel and to America, only to be turned back by the British and American authorities. These ship-loads of Jews had to return to Germany and to the fate that awaited them there. The British and Americans watched also. The refugees permitted into our country were only a trickle, a few from a vast sea of refugees clamoring to get in.

In the recent crisis in Israel, that state appealed to the great powers that had made it retreat from the Suez Canal several years ago. Especially did Israel appeal to America. America, perhaps for the legitimate reason of preoccupation with Viet Nam, did not answer the appeal. The Jews were again alone in the alley-way, surrounded this time by hundreds of thousands of Arabs, well armed and with one thought in mind.

Here in America, Rabbis, like myself, attempted to arouse Christian support for the besieged State. We went around with a statement which we asked Christian clergymen to sign. The statement said something like, "We call on world opinion to stand up against this latest attempt at the annihilation of the Jewish people". A few brave clergymen signed this statement. In all of Miami, I think there were a half dozen out of a thousand clergymen who signed it. I have never been so convinced of the fact that the Christian community, through its institutional representatives, either does not intend to help the Jew survive or is incapable of helping it. I wish to temper that statement in one sense. There were many Christian laymen who were with us in word and deed. Not a few Christians sent in money voluntarily to the Emergency Israel Appeal. Some of our representatives in Tallahassee collected considerable money from their Christian colleagues there. The father of one of our choir members, who is a Christian, sent me an unsolicited check for \$600.00 for the Israel Emergency Appeal. So we do have friends amongst the American Christian laymen, but we have to face the fact that the institutional representatives of the church were not able to bring themselves to express publicly their sympathy for Israel, if indeed that sympathy was present.



"If I am not for myself," said Hillel, "who will be for me?" How did American Jews do in this crisis? Did we rush to the fore? Did we understand that if we do not help ourselves, we are as good as dead? Some of us did show such understanding. Many of our members, I was pleased to observe, rushed to give money, to buy Bonds, to commit themselves, as if to say, "I vote with this gift for the survival of the Jewish community". I am proud to say that our membership responded with an enthusiasm equal to, or superior to, that of any other congregational membership in this area of the country. That is something of which we might rightly be proud. But let me add a sobering qualification to this statement. While Beth Am did relatively well in that crisis, only two-thirds of our members gave anything to help save Israel. That means one-third of you did not respond. One-third of you said in effect, "I will stand by to see if the others can handle it. If they can, I won't give". At a time when the only question was, shall the State of Israel live or die?, we had some members who were that calculating. I am not speaking now about how much you gave, dear friends. None of us here gave so much that our lives were changed one iota (almost none of us gave sacrificially). I am not criticizing those who gave \$10.00 when they might have given \$100.00. I am not finding fault with those who gave \$100.00 when they might have given \$500.00. I am speaking now of those who did not give \$1.00. I am speaking of those who watched, just watched, while Israel was squeezed into the Arab version of the alley-way.

"If I am not for myself, who will be for me?" The crisis in Israel is not yet over, but there are other crises, perhaps as serious, here within the American Jewish community. We said earlier that the Jews of Eastern Europe were able to survive only because they maintained a superior sub-culture in the midst of the majority culture. We are witnessing in America the disappearance of the Jewish sub-culture. This is another way of saying, American Jews are quickly assimilating, without maintaining a hard core of their sub-culture. We are repeating the experience of the German-Jewish community. Jews in America are increasingly less willing to be different. We cannot, in the few minutes we have together this evening, explore this problem in depth, but we can at least take careful note of it. If you are in fact concerned with Jewish survival, then, there are things that you must do besides giving of your money. For a sub-culture to survive, and ours is, of course, a religious sub-culture, your home has to be the prime training center, and the home has to be a source of inspiration. Your children have to know that you do certain things simply because you are Jews. They have to see you do those things deliberately and habitually. A culture involves ideas, of course, but it also involves an atmosphere that can be seen and heard and tasted. Jewish books and magazines that are read; Jewish music that is played and sung; distinctive holiday foods; special Sabbath family meals; fasting on Yom Kippur, the eating of Matzah on Passover, habitual generous giving to charity, a reasonable schedule of synagogue attendance, an active concern for the down-trodden in our society,



all of these things together add up to an "atmosphere". They constitute the details and fabric of a culture. If yours is a home where Judaism becomes a vital matter on the High Holidays alone, you are like the patriot who salutes the flag on the fourth of July but ignores his country and its problems the rest of the year. There is time this evening only to say that if you do not work at your Jewish identification on a year-round schedule, then you are assisting in its disappearance; for you may rest assured that your children will work at it even less than you do, and their children will cross the boundary line into limbo. In fact, I must caution you that if you do not actively and enthusiastically labor for the Jewish survival within your own household, then the time of the reckoning in your family, from all present signs, may be right now.

By your passive attitude towards Judaism and the Jewish sub-culture, you may be unwittingly teaching your children that being a Jew is of little consequence. Remember, children learn more from what you do, than from what you say.

"Im ayn ani li, mili - If I am not for myself, <sup>not</sup> who will be for me". Let us think this Kol Nidre Eve of all the things we have done to make for the survival of Judaism in our homes, in our synagogue, and in the world, and let us resolve to make amends for these sins of omission. If our conviction on this matter is deep enough, then we can pass on to the second part of Hillel's teaching which is, "If I am for myself alone, what am I". And, then, we go on, if we are really mature, to the third and final part of his teaching, which is, "If not now, when?!"