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A Faith to Live By

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Many years ago, a member of my congregation in New York sat in the Sanctuary prepared for the morning Rosh Hashanah service. He wore no hat or yamulka, but he wore a full, large-size, traditional tallit or prayer-shawl. "Joseph", I said to him, "If you wish to wear the tallit, why do you not also wear the yamulka?". Joseph had a ready answer. He knew exactly what he was doing. "I refuse to wear a hat", he said with determination, "to assert my difference from the Orthodox. "I wear a tallit," he continued, "to identify myself with my people".

The story has its humor, but it teaches us something about human emotions. I understand Joseph's position very well. There is in each of us a desire to break away from the traditions of the past, but we also have the need to belong to a meaningful community. On the one hand, we want to be free and independent souls; on the other hand, life would be empty if we did not feel ourselves part of something greater than ourselves. This is one of the reasons so many of you are here today, in spite of your varied approaches to Judaism.

We live in an age where there is much breaking away from the past, but it would be a mistake to assume that what the rebels are after is supreme solitude. There are few of us heroic enough or mad enough to live alone without comrades. So what does the student rebel do once he has taken off his hat, so to speak? Why, he joins a new group and puts on its hat or its tallit. The new tallit may not be made of cloth. It may be made of *hair*. It may be hair hanging down as long as the tallit of the super-Orthodox used to hang. You may be assured that while the long hair is an assertion of independence, on the one hand, it is also, and, at the same time, an attempt of the would-be rebel to link himself to another group. Indeed, it may well be true that the young rebel lets his hair grow long, (so to speak, follows the new ritual), more out of a desperate need to be accepted by his peers than out of a desire to demonstrate hostility to Mom and Dad. One thing seems clear, by wearing the hair in precisely the same style as his peers, with precisely the same part, the young rebel is not asserting any creativity. If that were the case, he would choose his own style, different from the young mob and suitable to his physical appearance, but what he wants and needs most is to be acceptable to his peer group by wearing the common ritualistic symbol. We humans, young and old, do curious things. While we may revolt against one symbol, we take on another symbol, for we cannot live without some symbol and without some group around which to rally.

Down with the Old

It seems that for all people talk about independence and for all our searching for individuality, few of us are capable of distinctive and private

beliefs. How else are we to explain what is happening in the world today? Many of the Christian children attending college today no longer believe in the deity of Jesus. Are they satisfied, then, to be non-believers? Hardly. The pain of non-believing is something few humans can bare. We have only to see the pain of a betrayed husband or wife to witness the pain that comes from disillusionment and the crumbling of trust. Many a wife hides her eyes from the obvious unfaithfulness of her husband, simply because she doesn't have the strength to accept the reality of his actions. She prefers to believe in his loyalty, because if she can't believe in that, to what can she cling? So the refugees from the organized religions of today turn to other faiths, rather than be among the non-believers. They turn to astrology, to Zen Buddhism, and to sundry other cults, and they invest, perhaps, even more fervor into these new religions than they did in their former faith. Sometimes, the stronger the disillusionment in the old faith, the stronger is the commitment to the new faith. The stronger the psychological need to run from the old group, the greater the commitment to the new group.

The younger generation in every age tends to assume that the old faith is decadent, while the new faith contains exclusively the essence of truth. History has not always supported the theory that the new faith is necessarily better. Those who think that anti-militarism is new should turn to Jeremiah who lived 2600 years ago. Those who think concern for the poor is new should read the biblical books of the prophets Micah and Amos. Those who think that inter-racial and international respect is a new goal should learn about the Hebrew prophets of the ancient past. The sixth century B.C. gave birth to Taoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism. Has the 20th century done better? The 20th century has given birth, amongst other things to Maoism, Hitlerism, and Stalinism, each of which had and has its ardent youthful followers. It is natural for young people to think that theirs is the only generation that has ever been idealistic. The truth is that there have been many such idealistic generations, and their passion did not always lead them to the promised land.

Arthur Koestler has written (N.Y. Times Magazine, Oct, 19, 1969), "We have seen . . . the radiant love of the Führer on the faces of the Hitler youth. We have seen the same expression on the faces of the little Chinese boys reciting the words of their chairman. They are transfixed like monkeys in ecstasy in religious paintings. The fanatic is prepared to lay down his life for the object of his worship, as the lover is prepared to die for his idol."

This is not, of course, to compare the cause of many of our young people today with Hitlerism and with Maoism. It is merely to point out, first, that the young need a cause, a leader, a prophet, a set of symbols,

a religion, if you will. Secondly, we wish to point out the danger of following a new cause and new leaders indiscriminately. Some Jewish students, for example, have been shocked to discover that one of the key goals of certain radical student groups is the dismemberment of the State of Israel. Other Jewish students, rather than surrender the comradeship of their radical friends, have vocally subscribed to this anti-Israel stand. They are apparently willing to dig the ground out from under themselves as Jews, in order to be accepted as a member of the new group they value.

New Faiths for Old

We adults had best learn one lesson very well. *The human being is basically a believer*. If we do not provide our children with a cause great enough to claim their allegiance, they will find another cause that will lead them away from us. Witness the bright Jewish boy who found no evidence of belief in his own home. His parents were pseudo-intellectuals, above it all. There was an absence of Jewish symbolism and celebration in their house, no identification with the synagogue or with other Jewish organizations, no participation in the basic human struggle for peace and justice as commanded by our religion. This bright Jewish boy went off to college, discovered Zen Buddhism, took a trip to the Holy Country, India, and came home, chanting his exotic prayers in a new tongue, and wearing a new symbol, a turban, a new yamulka. The boy, like most humans, had a need to believe in something worthwhile. His parents tried to transmit to him only the techniques for earning a good living. They had not taught him the wisdom of the good life (*chayim tovim*). They had not given him a sustaining faith.

It is in this light that we must look at the tribe of Charles Manson which murdered Sharon Tate and her friends in Hollywood. The members of that tribe were presumably strong enough to assert their independence of our normative society. Actually, they were highly dependent people in search of a new group and a new cause. Charles Manson became their prophet and God. His teaching was idealistic in many ways. "Everything in the world belongs to all people", Manson is quoted as saying. "All humans are part of a mystic whole; therefore, everyone should share what the other has, possessions and sex included". To the girls, Manson promised that he would strike off the chains of male superiority. In fact, he treated the girls like squaws or cattle. The punishment for the girls who would not follow commands, including the order to sleep with anyone and everyone, was excommunication. For lonely and dependent girls, the greatest punishment of all is rejection, excommunication. Susan Atkins, one of the young ladies in this commune describes Charles as "a beautiful guy". One of the girls used to say, "I'm like a tree, a bird. I'm here to beautify

the countryside, to be loved". In this tragic way did she rationalize her enslavement and debasement, but, at least, she belonged to something. Let us take note that in the studies made of the members of the Manson tribe, we find the same theme repeated over and over again. There were young people from homes where, for one reason or another, they felt unwanted or rejected.

To be sure, the Manson tribe is not a typical situation, but its extreme nature points up some realities about our society. Some people will do anything, even kill, in order to be part of a group which lends meaning to their lives, and they will rationalize, in idealistic terms, murder, stealing, promiscuity, and the taking of dope, because they are desperate for a cause by which to live.

While burning an ROTC building falls a little short of this extreme category, it is evidence of a similar kind of desperation. To fight against militarism is essential if our world is to survive. To fight against militarism by violent means is to lose the very thing you are fighting for. In the name of her cause, an Arab girl recently boarded an El-Al flight in Amsterdam intent on hijacking the plane. When a passenger wrestled with her, she pulled a grenade from her blouse and threatened, "I will blow up the plane". In the name of her faith and cause, she could have killed a hundred and more innocent people. Not too removed from this young lady are the Black Panthers who, in spite of some good things they do, encourage their members to hate Zionism, to hate merchant Jews, and to kill the police.

Yes, it is quite evident that faith is far from dead in our time. There is every evidence in more constructive areas that young people are searching more actively than ever for a faith and a cause. Witness the over-subscription to religious courses on all college campuses. Witness the large numbers of young people joining the Peace Corps and Vista to work in far away places amongst people impoverished and primitive. Our better young people are in one way, at least, superior to your generation and to mine. Our better young people are saying, "Don't just stand there, *do something*". These young people are in sympathy with the Talmudic Rabbi, of whom they may never have heard, who taught, "In the place where there are no men, be *Thou* the man"!

A Dynamic Faith

What is being challenged by our better young people today is not religious faith, but the vapid pretense at religion with which so many of us have been satisfied. In this sense, they are at one with the Hebrew prophets who stood in the village square, in the Temple court, and in the king's court and attacked those in high places for paying mere lip service

to the dynamic commands of God. To the wealthy worshippers who stood in the Temple of Jerusalem 2600 years ago. Jeremiah proclaimed in the name of God, "Will you deceptively cheat, steal, and lie in your business day after day, and, then, come into this court and chant your prayers and say 'we are saved' . . . Know that this is despicable to the living God who will not hold you guiltless for your hypocrisy". To the priests of old who spoke loving words but showed no concern for the poor and disinherited, the Prophet Amos proclaimed, in the name of God, "I hate, I despise your unctuous worship, take away from me the noise of your prayers and the stench of your incense, but *let justice roll down as the mighty waters and righteousness like an unfailing stream*". To the kings and nobles, Amos declared, "Woe unto you who lie upon your couches of luxury . . . but grieve not for the affliction of the people . . . and cause the day of revolt and violence to approach".

Surely the day of revolt and violence has come near in our time, and precisely for the same reasons as in the time of the Prophets. Precisely because we, who are part of the power structure of our time, have made of our religion a meaningless rehearsal, and because we have been insensitive to the anguish of others.

As I see where we are drifting in America today, I am more and more convinced of the significance of Prophetic or Reform Judaism for the future. When I speak of what our religion demands to my students at the University of Miami, I can tell you that Christian and Jew respond with equal fervor. The Christian says things like, "How real and down to earth your faith is". The Jewish student says things like, "Why didn't my parents teach me what is expected of me as a Jew". How sad to hear a young Jew say, "Why didn't my parents teach me what is expected of me as a Jew"?

Here is a faith which is expansive enough to embrace all mankind and intimate enough to speak of the special significance of each person. How is it that so many Jews know so little of this faith? Here is a faith open to the teachings of modern science, yet incorporating the wisdom of the ages. Why do we turn our back upon it? Here is a faith defined in terms of dynamic activity as summarized by the Prophet Micah, "*Do Justly, Love Mercy, Walk Humbly With Thy God*". Why do we not heed its call to action? Here is a cause and a faith your children can rally behind, why do you hide it from them?

Let us resolve in this solemn New Year assembly, that we shall truly become Jews ourselves. Let us truly learn what our Fathers have to teach us. In this way shall we come to respect ourselves, and in this way shall we earn the respect and emulation of our children.