

WHO IS A JEW?

By Rabbi Dr. Herbert M. Baumgard
(Rosh Ha-shanah 1970-5731, Temple Beth Am, Miami, Florida)

There was a time when it was easier to answer the question, "Who Is a Jew?" In the small villages of Russia and Poland, a Jew was anyone with whom another Jew mingled. A Jew was the children of your aunt and uncle, your friends with whom you played, the children with whom you went to school. One hundred years ago, in the most populous Jewish sections of Europe, a Jew was someone who was not a Christian, someone who had been Bar Mitzvah, someone who did not mix meat and milk. The tens of thousands of Jews who came to America around the turn of the century were people who ate hamenstaschen on Purim. They ate matzah on Passover and gefilte fish on Friday night. You did not need to define a Jew very closely in those days, because he defined himself so clearly in what he did and ate, and in how he spoke and dressed.

Short decades ago, the Nazis set themselves up as authorities on the question, "Who is a Jew?" The Nazi leader Goering, declared, "I decide who is a Jew". What he meant, of course, was that he decided who was worthy of the gas chamber. For Goering, being Jewish was a matter of blood on the one hand, or a matter of being anti-Nazi on the other. Short decades ago, anti-semitism was so open that the French philosopher Sartre wrote, "A Jew is anyone the non-Jew believes to be a Jew". Short years ago, it was impossible for a Jew to escape his Jewishness, even if he wished to assimilate. Since anti-semitism is more subtle today, since assimilation appears to be easier, since Jews, for the most part, have stepped out of their ghettos into the world at large, the question, "Who is a Jew", has suddenly become one only the Jew can answer, and he is finding it increasingly more difficult and more important to answer.

The age old definition of a Jew, as found in the Talmud, was recently challenged by a case tried before the Israeli Supreme Court. The Talmud teaches that a Jew is one born to a Jewish mother who has not openly renounced his faith. It further teaches that a non-Jew may become a Jew by sincerely accepting the Jewish faith. When the Supreme Court of Israel tried to change this definition in order to justify the entry of more people into Israel, a furore arose in that nation led by the Orthodox. The problem was not resolved until the Israeli Congress, or K'nesset, had passed a new law which, in effect, distinguishes between a Jew and an Israeli. The K'nesset left the religious definition of a Jew intact, but it legislated that one need not be a Jew to become an Israeli, if one is married to a Jew or if one is the child of, at least, one Jewish parent.

A New Definition for American Jews

The Israelis solved their problem in this regard as their immigration needs demand. They need as many immigrants as they can get. We Jews in America, however, face an entirely different situation. It is my strong feeling that we need a new definition of what it means to be a Jew suitable to the needs of our particular moment in history. The Orthodox and traditional Jews in America will, of course, hold to the Talmudic definition. For them, a Jew is anyone born to a Jewish mother or a sincere convert. It is my suggestion, however, that the Hebrew prophets had a definition much more suitable to our time. The prophets emphasized that being a Jew is not a matter of birth but a matter of belief and actions. Twenty-six hundred years ago, the Prophet Jeremiah proclaimed against those who were Jews in name only. "Behold," he contended, "the circumcised have become as those uncircumcised". Jeremiah believed that if a Jew did not follow the laws of justice and mercy associated with God, then, he ceased to have those particular qualities which make one a Jew. Long ago, the Prophet Amos taught that rather than being the chosen people, we were a people which chose to follow a certain path. For Reform Jews, as for the Prophets, a Jew is a member of the Jewish people who walks the path which leads towards the noble society. To the extent that one does not walk this path, however broadly defined, he ceases to be a Jew.

How Critical is the Belief in God?

Let us examine some of the aspects of the difficulty in forming a new definition of a Jew. Is a person a Jew, for example, if he doubts the existence of God? In days gone by the Jewish community has excommunicated those who proclaimed publicly that there was no God, but the most narrow Jewish community never excommunicated those who denied God privately. In fact, doubts about God were, at times, considered an expression of religiosity. One has only to read the Psalms and the Book of Job in our Bible to learn that our fathers did not hesitate to review their old concepts of God. They did not consider it irreverent to question old concepts and to project newer and higher concepts. That is to say, they never made an idol of their current concept of God. As their views broadened, they put the "old God" on trial, so to speak, complained about him and questioned his very existence. All of this is recorded in the Bible and the Talmud. Such questioning was considered a valid part of the search for God, which was equated with the search for meaning in life. The only thing the Jewish community would not countenance in those days was the public proclamation of atheism, for this was like saying all community standards have no foundation and may be willfully ignored. Our fathers thought with Dostoevsky, "Without God, all things are possible". There are no restraints and no standards without God. Without God, good and evil flow into each other and the value of human life and society are questioned.

There is considerable wisdom in the theistic position, yet it is possible to say that even if a man vocally denies God, we need not hold him guilty of blasphemy. We are sophisticated enough to say with one ancient Jewish teacher, "A man's belief in God is to be deduced from his actions. If he vocally denies God but acts with reverence towards God's creatures, it is imputed to him that he believes in God. And, conversely, if a man says he believes in God, but acts cruelly towards God's creatures, behold, this is blasphemy". Here we see again that it is man's conduct which is the chief thing in Judaism, not his professing of belief.

The Decisive Requirement

There are some areas, however, where I would not be inclined to be so liberal in defining a Jew. For I believe that just as the State of Israel is fighting for its life, so the Jewish community in America is fighting for its very life! Just as the State of Israel is increasingly inclined to accept into its midst anyone who will work with it and for it, so, I think, we Jews in America must be increasingly inclined to accept those who want to join our community. Just as the State of Israel requires its citizens to pick up a hoe, or to drive a tractor, or to show some active concern for its existence, so the Jews in America must require of those who claim to be part of our community that they show an active concern for the institutions and well-being of our community. In short, I would say a Jew is anyone, irrespective of whom his mother is, who commits himself to work for the survival of Jewish values and for the survival of the Jewish community.

Specifically, what I am saying is this, one can be a Jew in America and question the reality of God, but one cannot be a Jew and refuse to give money to Jewish charities. One can be a Jew and not attend Synagogue, but one cannot be a Jew and refuse to support the Synagogue which is the basic Jewish institution in America. One can be a Jew and not be a Zionist by philosophy, but one cannot be a Jew and fail to support the Combined Jewish Appeal and the Israel Emergency Fund. Now, I am not saying that if one gives in generous measure to Jewish charities and to the Synagogue that this giving of one's financial means automatically makes one a good Jew. I am merely saying that you have no right to claim your allegiance to a community when you do not make its continued existence possible. I have used an illustration from Erich Fromm before, but since it is such a good one, I will use it again. Dr. Fromm, the psychologist, suggests that if a woman tells you she loves her flowers, and she refuses to take the time to water them, then, don't believe her! Her inaction tells us what she really feels and thinks. Apply this illustration to yourself and to your friends. In how many ways and to what depth do you work with and for Jewish institutions?

What is a "good" Jew?

To be a "good" Jew is another matter. To be a good Jew requires action more intensive than anything we have previously described. It is one thing to help support Jewish institutions so that the fabric of the community will survive. It is another thing to make of yourself a vessel through which the spirit and dynamism of Judaism flows. To be such a vessel, to be a "good" Jew, one must first learn what Judaism is. One must learn what the Jewish people has represented down through human history, and one must try to understand what specific contributions we can uniquely make today. To be a good Jew one must know what has distinguished our fathers from their contemporaries. We have to learn why our fathers were able to give the world its primary goals and central ethics, and why the modern Jewish community seems relatively barren and uncreative. Our fathers believed that man is made in the image of the Divine, so they felt impelled to work for human growth and development. To be a good Jew, one has to acquire the conviction that the human community has a purpose beyond mere sensual gratification, and one has to work through the Jewish community and through the general community to help achieve this higher purpose.

To be a good Jew in today's open society has to mean something different than it meant in the Ghetto. In the old days, the pious Jew confined himself to a study of Jewish culture. We need not be so restrictive today, but we must make certain that in broadening our cultural base we do not lose that which is vital in our Jewish heritage. To be a good Jew today means that you can claim several heritages intimately as your own but not to the dilution of your Jewish heritage. One can be a Jeffersonian, as I am, and thrill to the ring of the words in the Declaration of Independence and in the Virginia Statute for Religious Liberty, but the good Jew has to remember, even more clearly, the eternal significance of the Ten Commandments and the continuing validity of that large body of ethical law of which the Ten Commandments are only a part. You can be a good Jew and like music from many sources, but not to the dilution of your knowledge of Jewish music. You can thrill to Bethhoven's Ninth Symphony, or to the music of "Hair", but if you don't know the special magic of Kol Nidre, Eli Eli, and Jerusalem of Gold, then, something is missing from your Jewish I.Q. You can be a good Jew and consider Martin Luther King amongst your saints, but if you don't also recognize that the words he quoted were from Isaiah and the Hebrew prophets and were born in the suffering of your people, then there is something deficient in your Jewish understanding.

To be a good Jew means that one uses, at least, a core of symbols that bind him to other Jews, present, past, and future. It means crying just a little when you take that first bite of matzah and think of the refugees of all ages. To be a good Jew means educating yourself to be grateful for the gift of life and for the opportunity life presents to love, to give, and to rejoice, as at Sukkot time, or at every sun-rise. To be a good Jew means to act "as if", as if human suffering has meaning and human history is not a sham. To be a good Jew is to understand, at least, as a non-Jew, Eric Hoffer, understands, that the meaning of human history is symbolically wrapped up in the Jewish people, for if they survive, Hoffer has said, then, there is hope for the rest of us. If the Jew fails, however, if the Israelis are swallowed up by their enemies, or if the Jews of America passively surrender their identity and become lost in the crowd, then, the world has lost its prime symbol of courage and purposefulness. Just as the Christians have long believed that if one Jew could be resurrected, there was hope for all men, so it is pragmatically true that if the Jewish community survives in dedicated vitality, then, it will lend strength, by example and infusion to all other men. It is the Jewish people, dear friends, which is the Messiah symbol in whose resurrection and survival all men shall live.

Who is a Jew in America? He who votes for Jewish survival by acting as a Jew, for the Jewish community, and through it, for all mankind, Who is a Jew?, he who is born of a Jewish mother, or of any mother, who lives out Jewish values, who maintains basic Jewish institutions, who educates himself in Jewish culture, who employs Jewish symbols, sings Jewish songs, and, by his very life, teaches what Moses sought to teach the slaves of Pharaoh, "The righteous shall live through his faith"!