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ONCE AGAIN-WITH FEELING (The Dangers of a Liberal Religion in Our Times)

Rosh Hashanah sermon by Rabbi Herbert M. Baumgard, Beth Am, Miami, Florida

During the High Holidays, it is fitting that we look back and forward. It is appropriate that we ask ourselves questions like, "Just where are we, as Jews, and where are we going?" The little things that are happening all around us can help us answer these questions.

For example, each of us knows of a Jewish child who has flirted at one time or another with a religion other than Judaism. That child may be your own, or it may be the child of our best friend. This is a phenomenon new to the Jewish community. In past eras no matter what happened to our people, no matter how extensive the suffering, the children remained true to the faith. They would not think of giving up those things for which Jews have fought and suffered for 40 centuries. Today, however, we all know of Jewish children who have been attracted to cults like "Jews for Jesus" or "Hiray Krishna". We know of young people who have become mesmerized followers of charismatic leaders like Sun Yung Moon, or Meir Baba, or Maharishi Mahesh Yogi. This phenomenon of Jewish children leaving the fold, in however small numbers is in one sense a by-product of the religious huchsterism of our time, but it is also an indication of a weakness in the armor of the Jewish community.

I have talked to many of these young people, some of whom have returned to the Jewish faith, and I have asked them, "Why did you leave us, even momentarily? What attracted you away from Judaism?" The young people would answer me along several lines of thought. Their answers were like this: "I was terribly lonely, and I didn't want to be an outsider. Most of my friends were Christians or into the Indian meditation, so I went along with them". Another answer was, "They made a fuss over me because I was Jewish, as if they especially wanted a Jewish convert. I felt important. They made me feel good". These other people taught me to pray". Still another young person said to me, "My parents don't believe in God. They laughed at me when I talked about God. These other people believed in God." When all the answers are added together, they point to these general conclusions; most of these young people were insecure; they needed someone outside the family, amongst their peers, to pay close attention to them; they needed to feel that they belonged to the "in" group; and they needed to believe in God and to pray, they needed a feeling of transcendence.

There was a time, when the Jewish community was close knit, when our children didn't have these problems. If their parents didn't believe in God, members of the extended Jewish family did. Grandfather did, or grandmother did, or Tantie Rosa did, or Cousin Morris did. Today, Jews are scattered throughout the non-Jewish community. Usually, our Aunts, Uncles or Cousins live in another city. Consequently, if one's own parents don't make a show of religion, if one's own parents don't make Judaism an intimate and warm experience, then the child may never know what Judaism is like.

I have been told by Christian missionaries, "Our national leaders advise us to go get the Jews. The Jews seem especially vulnerable today. They don't seem to know what they believe". Now please do not misunderstand me. I am not saying that every Jewish child who falls into the hands of missionaries of another faith comes from a home which has failed to give him Jewish teaching and Jewish emotional experience. The largest number of these youngsters are merely victims of our times. For example, a large percentage of Jewish converts to other faiths are precisely those youngsters who have been on drugs or have been sexually indiscriminate. They have wandered so far from what their parents have taught them to be proper conduct that they find it impossible to return home, so they turn elsewhere, hoping to find substitute parents and a substitute home, and perhaps unmindful of the fact they they are doubly rejecting their parents. Even discounting the peculiar nature of our permissive society and the special problems that arise from this permissiveness, we cannot ignore the fact that many of these young refugees from Judaism tell us that they found little or no religious emotional experiences in their home.

Not long ago a mother asked me to meet with her daughter who was marrying a Christian boy and converting to his faith. Converting to Christianity for reason of marriage is extremely rare even today, so I met with the young lady to find out why she was taking this step. Among the things she told me was this, "I can't wait to celebrate Christmas in my home". "Why", I asked her, "didn't you enjoy the Chanukah celebration in your parent's home?". Came the chilling answer, "We never celebrated Chanukah". Most of us are not quite like this girl's mother. We don't ignore Chanukah and the other beautiful Jewish holidays, but we pay them little more than lip service. Our celebrations lack that real depth and vigor which help to convince a child that we are really involved, that the celebrations are really important.

We might add up what I am saying in this way: if you give Judaism the soft sell in your home, you can bet your children will meet up with a hard sell for another religion outside your home. Or we might say it this way, if you don't transmit to your children a fervent belief in God, as Jews understand Him, your children will adopt another kind of belief in God. If you don't transmit to your children an exciting love for Jewish ritual and experience, then, they will attach their youthful ardor to non-Jewish ceremonies and symbols.

Now you might fairly say in response to this, "But Rabbi, my parents didn't transmit to me any clear beliefs. My parents didn't observe Jewish ceremonies and holidays with excitement and imagination." To which I must reply, "it is sad in a way that we who were deprived by our parents find ourselves in a more dangerous environment and we have no option but to try to communicate to our children what our parents may never have communicated to us". That means we have a great deal of preparation and work to do.

I might add that liberal Christian parents are meeting the same problems in this regard as liberal Jewish parents. Children of liberal

Christians are being attracted in much larger numbers than are Jews into fundamentalist sects like the Jesus Freaks, and their parents are greatly concerned. What we have to learn from this trend is that when young people are looking for something to believe in, the fundamentalist religions seem to attract them the most. In the competition between liberal and universalistic religious expressions on the one hand, and narrow hard line religious expressions on the other, it is the latter which seems more compelling to many youngsters. To put it another way, if you want your children to survive as Jews, you can't be just a wishy-washy liberal or just a universalistic human being. You have to be a devoted, affirming, practicing Jew.

Looking back into our history, we find evidence to support this view, even if we don't like to hear it. For hundreds of years, the Jews of Europe were not permitted to be citizens of the nations in which they lived. The Jews live in ghettos and were not permitted to move around freely or to participate in governmental affairs. In the 18th and 19th centuries, the walls of the ghettos began to crumble. France and Germany led the way in extending to Jews the opportunity for citizenship.

Understandably most of the Jews rushed to take advantage of the new opportunities. Moses Mendelsohn, an Orthodox Rabbi, translated the Hebrew Bible into German, so that Jews could learn German for the first time. Rabbi Mendelsohn encouraged the Jews to take advantage of the new liberalism. His sons and daughters became the leaders of the new interfaith and intercultural revolution. Their home became the meeting place for the intelligentsia, and the scientists, and the artists. Surely, the age had come, Mendelsohn's children thought, when the lines between Christian and Jew were gone. Their children grew up in an atmosphere where culture and the new liberal thought became more important than the Jewish religion. Some of these grand children were converted to Christianity, for what difference did it make now that presumably all religions spoke a universal language? Why should one remain a Jew and endure the negative treatment that came with that name? And so Abraham Mendelsohn, the Rabbi's son, banker and patron of the arts, baptized his son. As a Christian, Felix Mendelsohn was able to study in the best schools of music and to have his compositions played in the best concert halls, a privilege not available to Jews.

But the history of mankind teaches us that liberal eras come and go. In the end, Germany did not give up its hard core Christian fundamentalism. When Hitler arrived on the scene 150 years after Moses Mendelsohn, it was a simple thing for him to sweep away all of Germany's culture and liberalism and bring to the surface the virile anti-semitism that lingered in the hearts and mind of the people. Jews who thought they had saved themselves and their children from hatred by converting to Christianity, suddenly found that they had been unsuccessful even here. Among other things, Hitler banned the playing of music by Felix Mendelsohn and other Jewish converts!

Perhaps the period most directly comparable to the American Jewish experience is that of the Jews of the Greek period from 400 BCE onward. The Greeks conquered Judea under Alexander the Great around 300 BCE and proceeded to try to convert their Jewish subjects to the Greek way of life. Greek culture and religion were so intertwined as to be

indistinguishable. The Greeks had developed philosophy, art, theater, music, and athletic events almost to perfection, and each of these pursuits was considered to be a form of worship, dedicated to one or several of the gods.

The Greeks were much like the Americans, for they glorified the human body and made heroes of those who excelled in the athletic games. Naturally enough, many Jews were attracted to these exciting sports, as to the arts, and many of our ancestors adopted as their own the Greek attitude towards sexual freedom and openness to all kind of thought activity. In so doing, these Jews lost the force and distinctiveness of their own tradition and soon could not be distinguished from other Greeks. Only the Jews most loyal to Jewish thought and tradition survived as Jews and kept Judaism alive for the future.

There are living examples of Jewish assimilation into the Greek populace. I have a good friend in Miami whose last name is Zecharias, which is the Greek version of the Hebrew name Zechariyah. (Zechariyah means, "The Lord is my remembrance".) Mr. Zecharias has no memory of them, but I am sure that his forebearers were Jewish. His forebearers were amongst the descendents of Abraham who during the Greek conquest lost their Jewishness on the way to the stadium. When the crowd stood up to cheer the participants in the games, the Jews among them forgot in the shred excitement that Jews have to do more than applaud a winning contestant in an athletic contest. The Greek gods were thought to grant special awards to the champion athletes, but the Jewish God was more concerned with champions of the poor and with those who had the courage to oppose the slavery on which the so-called Greek democracy was based. When the Hellenized Jews cast aside their distinctive Jewish rituals and ceremonies, they cast aside the profound ideas that went with those ceremonies.

The Greek Empire began to fold when upper class Greeks placed more emphasis on their personal freedom than they did on national purpose. In America today, our government suffers from this same disease. We live in a society where self-seeking individuals shun their obligations to the survival of American purpose. What is true of us as Americans is also true of us as Jews. We don't want to hear of Jewish solidarity or of Jewish requirements. We want to be free not to do anything that is the slightest inconvenience, and we want to do only those things that titillate our senses. We want to be totally free individuals in a universalistic society---universalistic, that's the word that shields us from our responsibility to our family and the the Jewish people.

So thought the Jews of pre-Hitler Germany. So thought the children of Rabbi Moses Mendelsohn. So thought the Hews under the influence of the Greek conquest. So thought the great, great grandparents of my friend Mr. Zecharias. Well, let us learn at least one thing here tonight. There is no surviving group if it can not claim the loyalty and command the actions of the individuals who comprise it. If the individual Jew does not continue to bear in his person the stamp of Jewish belief and practice, then there is no Jewish group. Judaism has not survived for four thousand years without a structure and without precisely defined holidays and rituals and symbols. We have not survived without definite beliefs which have served to make us different from our contemporaries in every age. In America, most Jews are now so far from the center of Jewish belief and observance, that they hardly feel the

gravitational pull of that center and they are in danger of shooting off into the chaos of outer space.

Jewish history seems to teach us this: if you equate your Judaism solely with the liberal and universalistic values of your time, and if you are not to some significant degree an observing Jew, then the chances for you and your family assimilating into the general environment are extremely good. History teaches us that a minority group which affirms only abstract ideals but does not maintain a core of distinctive ceremonies, celebrations and practices soon vanishes. Witness the difficulty experienced by the Ethical Culture movement. The Ethical Culture movement was formed in New York about fifty years ago by individuals from differing backgrounds, although most of them were Jews. The Ethical Culturists felt that the time had come when we must rise above our religious differences to assert those values which are common to all good men. Sound marvelous doesn't it. Then, why hasn't the Ethical Culture movement prospered and grown? Because the movement was purely a product of the mind; because it didn't have centuries of growth and development behind it; because it didn't have a system of symbols and rituals; because it had no roots and branches. What roots it had were Jewish roots, and Jewish roots do best when they grow Jewish branches and Jewish fruit.

Do I sound too chauvinistic to you? I am not saying that we cannot admire the good things in other religions and in other people. Noone is more active in the interfaith movement than I am. We must cooperate with other groups of good will, but we should cooperate as committed Jews, who in addition to extending the hand of friendship and cooperation to others, wish to continue to live as part of our own group, nourishing our own ideals from the basis of our time proven tradition. Only a would be suicide cuts himself off from his roots and attempts to fly in an atmosphere where survival depends upon rootedness. The fundamentalist religions are proving this to us today. They are growing in numbers while the liberal religions in all faiths are declining.

The liberal religions are declining because their followers are lukewarm in their belief, because the parents communicate this lukewarmness to their children, and because the children then respond in one of two ways. The danger is that the children of liberal religionists either come to believe still less than their parents, or they leave to join a movement which demands more from them. I am saying to you that a religious movement that does not demand a great deal from its followers will not survive. All I have said tonight is by way of introducing a discussion on that credo.

A liberal outlook on religion, such as that fostered by Reform Judaism, is respectful of religions which are different from itself, but respect for other religions should not decrease the intensity of our devotion to our own cause and even of irreligion. We might put it this way, precisely because he is tolerant of other religions, the advocate of a liberal religion must know the distinguishing aspects of his own religion so well, and practice them so fervently that he will avoid the tendency to slip off into limbo. Because a liberal religionist has to walk this thin line bridging the chasm between the universal and the particular, it is much more difficult to be liberal than to

than to be traditional. Reform Judaism is anything but the easy way out. It requires a much greater talent-- the talent of being a part of the general society without permitting oneself to become submerged into it. But let us not deceive ourselves. To be a liberal Jew is to participate in a dangerous enterprise which requires much planning and knowledge.

You can see that I am making a very limited proposition this evening, but I intend my remarks tonight to be only a preamble. May I ask you now to take out that "Credo" that I asked you earlier in the service to place into your coat pocket or purse. I would like you to take that Credo home and read it very closely. Tomorrow morning at the 9:30 adults only service here in the Sanctuary, I will discuss the points in that credo in some detail. Those of you who are not coming to the morning Sanctuary service but who will attend the Family adult service, either in the morning in the gym or in the afternoon will not hear a sermon on that subject, so you will have to study the credo by yourselves all the more diligently. Please don't throw the credo away. It is my hope that some of you will hold discussion groups taking off on this credo, and it can be a beginning for a more dynamic understanding of what it means to be a liberal Jew.