

THE GENIUS OF JUDAISM

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Recently, we have all read in our newspapers stories of families who have complained to Congress about the abduction of their children by certain religious sects. Sometimes the complaint is against the Rev. Moon who has come all the way to America from Korea to speak in a language our young people do not understand and to proclaim that he is the new Messiah. It is truly amazing how many young Americans have become disciples of the Rev. Moon, have joined his band of workers, and have consecrated their life to him and to his movement. The very fact that they cannot understand what the Rev. Moon is saying in his native tongue does not seem to be a handicap. On the contrary, it seems to be one of his assets, for since the young people cannot understand him, their imagination is free to wander and to project upon the Rev. Moon all their hopes for miraculous salvation.

I have met some of the Moonies as his converts are called just as I have held discussions with converts to Haray Krishna and to the Jesus Freaks. All these youngsters have certain things in common. They share an extreme inferiority complex, they do not feel that they are important to their own group, they are given to mental depression, and they are desperate to be forgiven for real or imagined sins, and they want to feel needed and important.

Let me tell you an incident which just occurred to me. A young man whom I do not know called me on the phone to talk about his experiences with the meditation movement headed by the 18 year old Prince from the Far East. You may recall reading in the papers about this young Prince. His mother had disowned him because she feels he is simply out for money. At any rate, the young man who called me was obviously intelligent but just as obviously he was given to mental depression and he was looking for a way to blissfulness. He told me that he had gone to Detroit for a convention of those who were faithful to the Prince, and he had participated in one of their rites. This rite took place with the Prince seated on a hill. The faithful were invited to walk under the Prince through an arch which led to a tunnel under the hill. My caller told me that as he walked through the arch, knowing the Prince was just above, he experienced a moment of bliss such as never has been his before.

Now, clearly, we have here a case of hypnosis induced by prior suggestion and those who want to believe that bliss can be obtained miraculously can be persuaded to believe this and will indeed be helped to experience relaxation and contentment at least for a while. The problem is that whatever causes one to be depressed will return later on, and my young man was smart enough to understand that his bliss did not last very long.

Certain expressions of Christianity like the Jesus Freaks present a similar brand of persuasion. They ask you to believe that if you will only accept Jesus as your Lord and Savior that you will be saved from hell fire and you will experience momentarily and forevermore an inner joy and peace. The Jesus Freaks cater to young people who are misfits and drop outs, desperate for this experience of inner security. They will, of course, present themselves for this conversion process, and again, many of them do feel very good indeed after their baptism. In this rather easy and quick fashion they become part of a large group which speak constantly of love and caring, and the young person feels that he belongs, a matter of great importance to him. Further, the youngster is given a job to do, and this is critical. He now is charged with the responsibility of converting others-of saving them from their sins and giving them this feeling of joy. Let us not belittle the significance of making a young person feel important with work to do. This is a central part not only of the Jesus Freak movement, but also of the Rev. Moon organization and Hiray Krishna. Always there is work for the young person to do. He now becomes the junior savior for which God awards him merit points.

Against this kind of dynamic movement, both liberal Christianity and liberal Judaism have suffered. While we have taught that everyone has the right to believe as he wishes and while we have sat back without propagating our faith, the less liberal movements, particularly those mentioned have been claiming that they alone have the truth and they have been trying to embrace in their movement all of the bewildered souls wandering around America today and let me tell you that is a bounty crop of such souls out there.

Certain groups of Jews which are more traditional in their faith have understood what is going on in the large no-mans land of America, and they have become very active in trying to convert wandering Jews back

to the faith. Their job is not as easy as that of the Moonies or the Jesus Freaks, for the Jews do not specialize in quick and miraculous conversions. A Jew can invite a person only to begin the process of study, a process which includes the Bible, the Talmus, the Midrash, Hasidic Lore, etc. This is not what young people are looking for today. They don't want to study over a long period of time. They want a sudden and miraculous way to the truth. They want the key to the safe not the combination to the lock.

While observing this phenomenon on the fringes of our society, can we learn something ourselves? In my discussions with adult Jews, I find something of this attitude also. They have no intention of beginning the process of study in order to enrich themselves in the immense reservoir of Jewish knowledge. They want to learn it all on one foot, while they stand on one foot. Since I am a Reform Rabbi who accents the rationalist elements in Judaism, I can't deceive you. I must tell you that Judaism is a religion whose deepest secrets are revealed only after continuous study, but there is an approach to Judaism which talks about miraculous and immediate understanding. Perhaps I can tell you something about that and it might be helpful to you, because it requires a commitment to study which we are not willing to give. I suspect also that many of us adults would like to be converts to a cause, and committed workers in that cause. Let me say to you that you can be, if you'll only take the 1st step. After you have taken the 1st step, the 2nd step is easier and the 3rd much easier. What is the 1st step? The 1st step is not miraculous salvation.

The Hasidim of the 18th and 19th centuries would understand these young people very well. One Hasidic Rabbi taught, there is a key which opens the Gates of Heaven but God prefers that we smash the lock with one heartfelt sigh. The Rabbi who taught an emotion oriented type of Judaism was saying that the key to the Gates of Heaven was the rationalistic approach to religion, but God preferred that we love Him so deeply and feel so deeply that we wouldn't need a key at all to get through the Gates. Merit for feeling, taught the Rabbi, is greater than merit acquired by rationalistic study. The Rabbi had something of the truth. We can get so caught up in our studies and rationalistic pursuit, that we can lose that which is most important, the inner feeling or conviction. On the other hand, blind feeling can be both productive and disastrous. How often we see people with deep emotional expression harm themselves

and those around them because they have no discipline or clear road to follow.

While it is true as shakespeare says, that the heart has a mind the mind knows not of. The reverse is also frequently true. The mind has a heart the heart knows not of. One can be both rationalist and feeling, and it is this balance which we need now in our society and in our religious expression, not one or the other, but both. If you have heard me call Beth Am a Hasidic Reform Congregation, it is because we attempt to incorporate in our services and in our programs both the rationalist and emotional aspects of our tradition.

At this point some of you might say, but Rabbi the problem in modern Judaism is not with the Temple. The real problem is in the home. Some of us employ neither the rationalist nor emotional approach to Judaism in our homes. We simply ignore it. Then when our children go in search of another kind of religious expression, we wonder how that can hapen.