

Who Is A Jew?

By Rabbi HERBERT M. BAUMGARD, D.H.L.

I believe that just as the State of Israel is fighting for its life, so the Jewish community in America is fighting for its life because of the ignorance and indifference of our Jews. 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 us. Just as the State of Israel requires its citizens to pick up a hoe, or to drive a tractor, or to show active concern for its existence, so the Jewish community of 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 who commits himself to work for the survival of Jewish values and the Jewish community, irrespective of whom his mother is."

In more specific terms, 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 (read-Federation). 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. (Don't let your neighbor go without membership). One can be a Jew and not be a Zionist, but one cannot be a Jew and fail to support the Combined Jewish Appeal and the Israel Emergency Fund. I am not saying that if one gives to Jewish charities and to the Synagogue that his 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 work to make its continued existence possible. Erich Fromm, the well known psychologist, has said, "If a woman tells you that she loves her roses, and doesn't water them, don't believe her."

To be a GOOD Jew requires action more intensive than anything we have previously described. To be a good Jew, one must first learn what Judaism is; one must first learn what the Jewish people has represented throughout history and what significance it has in the realm of ideas and pragmatic living today. To be a good Jew, one must try to comprehend that Jewish creativity and striving has given the world almost all of its primary goals and almost all of its central ethics. To be a good Jew, one must share in the belief that the human community has a purpose beyond mere sensual gratification and that we, as Jews, have a role to play towards the attainment of that purpose. To be a good Jew means that one must learn to identify with the slaves under Moses, to feel the lash of the taskmaster; it means that one must climb Sinai with Moses to seek out the moral law under which men must live. To be a good Jew means that one cries out with Isaiah, "Justice, justice shalt thou pursue!"; it means that we learn with Hosea to forgive one another; that with Elisha, we have faith in the tools God has provided us with which to solve our problems.

To be a good Jew means that we use, at least, a core of symbols (rituals) that will bind us to other Jews, present, past, and future. It means lighting Sabbath candles to remind ourselves that the Power that

makes for creative change is ever present. It means eating Matzah to taste of the dryness of human suffering and to be moved to help supply the hungry today with bread. 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 Eric Hoffer, a non-Jew, understands, that the whole meaning of mankind is symbolically wrapped up in the Jew. For if the Jew, the oldest living bearer of civilization, makes it, in spite of his suffering for four thousand years, then, there is hope for other peoples and communities, but if the Jew fails, if the Israelis are overwhelmed by their enemies, or if American Jews commit spiritual suicide, then, mankind has lost its prime symbol of courage and purposefulness. The Christians have long believed that if one Jew could be resurrected, then, there was hope that all good men might be resurrected. It happens to be pragmatically true that if the Jewish community survives in dedicated vitality, then, it will lend strength by example and infusion to all other men and communities. It is the Jewish people, often crucified, which is the true "Christ" symbol in whose resurrection and survival all men shall live.