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 P.O. Box 549, Las Vegas, Nevada, 89101
 Editor and Publisher Jack Tell
 Business Manager Bea Tell, 870-1255
 Vegas News Reva Schwartz, 737-4639
 and Barney Glazer, Harry Golden, Tina Werner,
 Sid Peilte, Percy Villa, Dayeau Cartoons.
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Editorial

Jews in America

The extraordinary advancement in the status of Jews in the eyes of our non-Jewish beholders in America has been strikingly dramatized in a recent speech in New York City by a ranking historian on the colonial and New England aspects of American life.

Jews have been accustomed to - and some have always cringed a little - at Jewish-sponsored efforts to prove we are just as good as, or at least no worse than, everybody else. Similarly there has been a slightly unedifying policy of trumpeting the triumphs of Jews in medicine, science and similar fields, even when the achievers were Jewish only in name, with those names often adulterated into a less Jewish identifiability.

It is only in recent years that there has developed a readiness among experts - non-Jewish experts, that is - to laud Jewish group experience as having made wholesome contributions to those values for which America stands. Specific criticisms admitted, it is still true that America remains the last best hope of man on this troubled planet.

Now comes a historian who says that without a thorough grasp of two Jewish value systems, it is impossible to really understand the American culture, that complex of dreams, visions and hopes which have made America unique in man's halting struggle for a decent world for all. One is the Puritan interpretation and application of the Old Testament as a record of morality and ethics. The other is the value system which the huge waves of post World War I immigrants brought with them to this country.

Jews, at least some Jews, are aware of the fact that the Puritan psychology in America was based on a profound knowledge of and respect for the Jewish Scriptures, though one must look through many standard public school textbooks to find the historians who have acknowledged it. What is really amazing is that a top historian has seen in the ideals and behavior of the immigrant Jews - the "greenhorns" - a core aspect of the American ethos.

To Dr. Clifford K. Shipton, director of the American Antiquarian Society and author of many standard works on New England history, all of this is self-evident. He outlined his views at the recent 81st annual meeting of the American Historical Society, where he urged his fellow historians to begin digging in synagogue and other Jewish communal records to find the names of a maximum number of Jewish immigrants and to trace and study their activities. Such material, Dr. Shipton said, was essential to the basic research which, he declared, had to be done if the Jewish immigrant experience was to be properly grasped as a fundamental key to understanding the heart and soul of the American vision.

Christian Science Monitor Errs

How agonizingly hard it is to get the story of Arab-Israeli tensions told accurately is illustrated by a human vet revealing error in a recent presentation by the carefully-edited Christian Science Monitor.

Dividing a full page into equal parts, The Monitor called upon two of its top correspondents to tell the plight of Arab refugees, first out of Beirut, and then out of Tel Aviv. Towards the end of the Beirut article, an Arab intellectual, Fayez Sayegh, is quoted: "In 1948, the Palestinian Arab people were forcibly dispossessed. Most Palestinians were evicted from their country. . . . The Zionist settler state therefore has remained a usurper, lacking even the semblance of legitimacy." Then the Monitor correspondent adds that "the American Jewish author, David Lillienthal, agrees with the Arab view."

The Monitor undoubtedly meant to say that Alfred Lillienthal, the writer and lecturer so much admired by Arabs, agreed. David Lillienthal, the distinguished engineer-economist, not identified with the Jewish community, would have far too great a regard for the facts to agree with Mr. Sayegh.

No Cut For Circumcision

Why does the ritual of circumcision continue to be practiced almost uniformly by Jews today, when ritual observance in general is declining?

This question is raised by Erich Isaac, a specialist in the geography of religion now on the faculty of the City University of New York, in the January issue of COMMENTARY. Professor Isaac points out that the continued observance of circumcision is especially mysterious when one considers the fact that new research has cast grave doubts on its presumed medical value.

The article, entitled The Enigma of Circumcision, states that circumcision is a problematical and mysterious practice for Jews since it is a blood rite and "Judaism is clearly at variance with the idea of blood rites."

Tracing the history of circumcision, Mr. Isaac asserts that ancient commentators "have expended surprisingly little effort in confronting the question of why should circumcision have been the mark of Abraham's covenant with God." Such explanations one finds run the gamut from claiming that it makes men more perfect "by removing an existing flaw" to maintaining that it is "a way of preserving the Jews' separate identity."

More recent explanations, "spurred by the identification of circumcision as a primitive practice and the challenge of an environment that put a premium on assimilation," have tended to advance moralistic and symbolic reasons for the ritual. For example, Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch claimed that "the purpose of circumcision was to affirm that man's body as well as his soul is hallowed by God and that the infliction of the mark of the covenant on man's most animal part served to symbolize this affirmation."

No more helpful in explaining the rite, according to Mr. Isaac, have been the scholars who have concentrated on its practice among various primitive tribes. They have connected circumcision, among other things, with "ancestor worship, sacrifices to the goddess of fertility, tribal marks, methods of warding off evil, mating devices, marriage rites, and puberty rites." He adds:

"Though widely divergent, these theories tend to have something important in common: the fact that circumcision involves the sexual organ has led most of those who have attempted to find the meaning of the rite to focus narrowly on its sexological aspects."

A more fruitful approach, Mr. Isaac suggests, would be "to stick as closely to the (biblical) text as possible and thus to consider circumcision as a covenant rite."

In pursuing this line of inquiry one discovers that Abraham performs not one but two covenant ceremonies, and that they are related: "In each there is a cutting. It therefore seems plausible that biblical circumcision can be understood as a special case of the ancient custom of using cutting or dismembering rites in connection with treaty and covenant obligations. Also, in terms of ancient ritual the act of severing was not symbolic of separation but rather of a prior or subsequent state of wholeness."

Mr. Isaac states that some evidence indicates that early circumcision among Jews "involved only a simple cutting," and that the kind of circumcision performed in the case of Abraham "may well have been the incomplete circumcision" that was found in this century among the Masai. Therefore, the "second circumcision" mentioned in Joshua (5:2) "may refer to the completion of the operation; indeed an old Jewish tradition maintains that this is the meaning of the passage."

Most Orthodox Jews today, according to Mr. Isaac, understand circumcision "as a sacramental act which establishes the religious community of the Jews." However, unlike Baptism, circumcision does not establish the male child as a Jew. Mr. Isaac adds:

"If he is born of a Jewish mother, he is a Jew in the eyes of Jewish law and remains one whether or not he is circumcised. Circumcision does, however, act as a sacrament for the convert, and it is a powerful symbol of the Jews as a community of faith."

Circumcision, Mr. Isaac concludes, remains a mysterious rite "especially when it is tripped of its medical aura. For it is at variance with Jewish rejection of blood rites." He suggests that ultimately its rationale may lie in its quality of mystery; its function may be "at variance and to serve as an unmistakable reminder that religion is not a system of autonomous ethics, to teach the Jews who accept this covenant rite that morality must be understood as commanded rather than as part of a rational natural order."

COMMENTARY, now in its 20th year, is an independent monthly magazine of thought and opinion published as a public service by the AMERICAN JEWISH COMMITTEE. Norman Podhoretz, author and critic, is its Editor.

NEW YORK (WNS) The National Planning Conference of the Israel Bond Organization concluded its three-day meeting here with approval of a record goal of \$115,000,000 for the 1967 campaign for the sale of Israel Bonds.

TEL AVIV (WNS) Recent press reports that large numbers of immigrants were leaving Israel were termed here highly "exaggerated" by a Jewish Agency official.

TELL TALES

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the free and clear, it looks like we can breathe a bit easier. Now, we look back at where and what we've been through, take inventory, analyze the pros and cons and perhaps venture an opinion on things to come.

It started with a suggestion from Jack Entratter that an English-Jewish newspaper which not only brought news of interest from outside, but also conveyed what was happening in our own area, could be of advantage to the entire Jewish community. The next step was to sound out other Jewish leaders, and the results were most encouraging. Especially, from Harry Wallerstein, president of Temple Beth Shalom, were we induced to proceed with the idea. Harry's wife, Kay, one of the most active women in charity, religious and civic affairs of Las Vegas, was the most sincere in her opinion on our commencing a newspaper. She will be endowed, always in our mind as a cherished friend.

Kay said she had faith in our ability to put out an interesting and provocative newspaper, but she feared the pitfalls that had to be overcome. Two years ago, Las Vegas was commencing its worst economic recession of all time. Now, the area is just about starting to rise from the depths. Twenty-four months ago the Jewish community was starting to split into factions. Under capable and strong leadership, it appears to be more solidified and compact than ever before. It was not only the general conditions at the time that disturbed Kay as she cautioned us in her encouragement to go ahead with our plans. Kay said if the venture flopped, it wouldn't matter so much. It would just be another of those "nothing ventured, nothing gained," projects. What did matter to Kay, was how a failure would effect this writer's disposition. That's why Kay will never cease being the No. 1 favorite of the Israelite.

The next step was to get the show on the road. We sent letters to everyone we knew in the Jewish community, in addition to most VIPs, prominent businessmen and others, stating that if they desired an English-Jewish newspaper, it would be necessary they support it by sending in promptly, subscriptions of six dollars for one year or ten dollars for two. The returns were phenomenal, beyond our wildest expectations. We had enough finances to pay for the preliminaries and get the first edition into print. We were through with fancy ideas, paper work and planning. Now we had to roll up our sleeves and get to work.

We never disputed that ads were the life blood of any publication, but our main interest was in editorial content and makeup. Get enough readers, we contended, keep them excited and interested, and the ads will beat a path to our pages. We believe we were then, and still are, on the right track.

The first edition, Vol. 1, No. 1, dated January 29, 1965, was dedicated to Temple Beth Shalom. All the pioneers of the Jewish Community and the important founders of the synagogue were respectfully chronicled and for the first time, the twelve past presidents of the Temple were pictured. Although not necessarily in order of their tenures, they were A. J. Shur, Nate Mack, Mike Gordon, Jake Kozloff, Harry Levy, Lloyd Katz, Mel Moss, Jack Entratter, Al Goot, Dave Zenoff, Harry Wallerstein and Jerry Mack.

The story of Judaism in Vegas started back, about 1931, when a dedicated group called "Sons and Daughters of Israel," conducted services in private homes, determined to keep our religion alive in the desert. Then about 1943, a B'nai B'rith chapter organized High Holiday Services in the Rectory of a Catholic Church. The next year it was in the old Elks building, and then the first Temple at 13th and Carson Streets, now a Greek Orthodox Church. When space became limited Services were conducted at the Huntridge Theatre. The ever-growing Jewish Community, now conservatively estimated at about 5,000 families, finally found a haven at the present Jewish Community Center, a complex equal in stature, dignity and beauty, with any home of religion anywhere.

On sprawling, well-kept grounds, abundant in luxurious foliage and path through grassy lawn, are our Sanctuary and social hall, Hebrew School, pre-school, Sunday school and the Danny Kolod Youth House, dedicated by Ruby and Ester Kolod in memory of their son.

Of what purpose would the physical structures be, if it were not enhanced and permeated by the spiritual guidance of two dedicated men of Judaism, Rabbi Aaron S. Gold and Cantor Joseph Kohn. They have converted so many of us into regular attendants at our Sabbath Services.

The first edition carried a front page obit of Winston Churchill, Always a Zionist.

Then, of course, there were the advertisers, and as we flip the pages we find some who have been with us from the very beginning, the Sands Hotel, Mel Aire Bridal Shoppe and Pat's Chinese Kitchen.

Of the Sands' Jack Entratter, Carl Cohen, Charlie Kandal and the late Aaron Welsberg, what more can be said? They have been staunch supporters from the start, and to them and Aaron's memory, we are most grateful, to Airion Scott, that bundle of perpetual enthusiasm, constantly spreading joy and encouragement, not only to

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