

Rabbis' Bill of Rights

In the turmoil of our times, we often tend to stress transient values only because they serve as palliatives that divert us from the pit, from tormenting dilemmas. This is particularly true in the area of religion, where it has become customary for laymen and men of the cloth alike to get lost in the sands of the desert rather than seeking for the admittedly more difficult path that leads to the horizon.

In our own Jewish enclaves too we seem to be plagued by the disease of diversion. And in our looking for cures for the ills that sap our vitality and drive our young out of the fold, we more often than not turn to mere palliatives, to the quack doctors and the medicine men, instead of to roots which alone can give us sustenance and life. We often speak these days of making Judaism relevant to the problems of the day -- which is all good of course -- but in the process we seem to forget that Judaism has a meaning and a life of its own. We rightfully participate these days in programs and efforts of vast social and political implications, but in the process we too often forget to guard our own vineyards.

This of course is no plea for isolationism, only for balanced values. Of what avail is it if our children take the path of social and political betterment if they lose in the process the path to our own doors, as some of the latest studies indicate.

What, then, is the remedy? Rabbi Levi A. Olan, in our opinion, placed his finger on the patient's pulse when he cautioned at the recent annual meeting of the Central Conference of American Rabbis that the Jewish need of the moment is to combat what he called "the dangers to the American Jewish community stemming from the secular-oriented synagogue in a God-ignoring society." It is precisely because of the secularizing of our sacred precincts that our young have been driven away from the synagogues. Quite obviously, a synagogue that holds no other attraction than a college campus will remain deserted by the young and the intellectual.

What is required is restoration of the synagogues to place their original functions and freedom for rabbis from the "secularized" laymen who dictate the functions of the rabbinate in defiance of tradition.

If we fail in this, the secularizing of the synagogue inexorably will lead to its closing.

A Man Alone

By Nathan Ziprin

His beard flowed majestically over his face, concealing his years and the ravages of an illness that almost kept him from coming to the United States, which might have been a most merciful event in his life. But as Chief Rabbi Yehuda Leib Levin of Moscow stepped on the platform facing an estimated audience of about 2,000 in the Hunter College auditorium he showed no signs of fatigue or concern over the possible mood of the spectators.

Even before stepping to the mike on the platform, the colors in which they have emerged from visitors to that country from abroad. Yet they were hopeful he would be sufficiently courageous not to indulge in the familiar semantics of the Soviet apologists. But for understandable reasons he chose another path and the grin was sorely deep even among those in the audience who came to cheer. Many, paraphrasing the Biblical tale of Balaam, said we came to cheer but ended up jeering.

And yet there was something barbaric, uncouth, about the outbursts. Here was the spokesman of a huge Jewish community and a man of learning deserving of respect in his own right and he was actually jeered off the platform. Not having faced his dilemma how could they undertake to judge him? The question tortured me as I watched what to me appeared a made scene, as if from the script of the way off brand of writers. And yet we must not judge them harshly, for they were deeply moved, deeply concerned, hurt and humiliated by what is happening to the community of Jews from which they sprang. To repress their feelings, they should have wept, but they found another outlet instead, not in agonizing silence but in noise and in angry shouting.

They expected the rabbi to say there was no discrimination in the Soviet Union and that Jews were free to live and function not unlike all other citizens of the country, unless of course he was suddenly seized by a moral compulsion for which he would have to pay a tragic price for himself and for Soviet Jewry alike. But when he kept on harping on the theme time after time the audience tired in disbelief and in wonderment to the point of drowning out his words with charges of falsehood, deception. One young lady in the back of me, a student at Hunter College, remarked to her escort she was reminded of Shakespeare's phrase about protesting too much. His constant hammering on the theme of lack of discrimination and anti-Semitism in the Soviet Union was jarring to most of the Jewish ears in the audience, many of them comparatively recent immigrants from that part of the world.

A man who said he was a professor of history at Columbia University and a Gentile told me: "When the communist parties in England, Italy, France and other countries protested against Soviet anti-Semitism did they protest against the non-existence of a situation?"

The bearded people, and religious young with yarmulkes

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and peoth, were quick to notice that the rabbi eschewed venerable rabbi must have had a foreboding of what was ahead. As Mr. Richard Korn, president of the American Council for Judaism, stepped on the platform and introduced himself to the audience, the reaction was one of vociferous booing and jeering, and when he told the gathering the council had no other purpose in inviting the Moscow rabbi than establishing a link between the Jewries of the two countries, there was a wave of derisive laughter, with some people shouting it was chutzpah of the council to pretend to act as spokesman for the American Jewish community.

But if the rabbi had a foreboding that the evening might produce a commotion, he could not have sensed that it would break up in pandemonium and near riot.

As the people trekked to the auditorium, there was an air of radiance about them. Here it was for the first time they would hear an authentic spokesman for religious Jewry in the Soviet Union and they were burning with the fever of expectation. What would he say, many were heard to murmur.

The spectators seemed mindful of the fact that a religious figure in the Soviet Union is not a master of his tongue though perhaps of his thoughts. They did not expect the Chief Rabbi to portray Jewish life in the Soviet Union in the word Israel as if it were anathema and that he neither mentioned Zion, traditionally accepted by religious Jews as the place whence came the law, nor Jerusalem, whence came the word of God.

The storm against the rabbi broke out ferociously when he said categorically that reports reaching this country about the Jewish situation in the Soviet Union were absolutely false and only designed to further the cold war. At this point, a noted Jewish intellectual and writer shouted: "This is a lie, a falsehood, I am not a politician, I have no interest in promoting tensions between our countries, I am not a propagandist, I speak out only because I know the truth not from newspapers and books alone but from a number of visits to your country."

The rabbi stood silent, almost petrified. Had he struck too high a key perhaps? Or were all these people suddenly falling into the grip of madness? If he had those thoughts they will remain his secret forever, for at that moment he was a man alone.

To sensitive ears in the audience there were two parts to the speech, with a sort of schizophrenic quality -- one in which the rabbi spoke as a man of God, quoting Bible, Talmud and other sacred sources and sages in support of an idea, and the other of a man speaking in the tortuous semantics of the politicians and the propagandists.

Yet American Jewry would have been poorer if it did not have the opportunity to hearken to this man, who gives the appearance of dignity, humility, scholarship and deep sincerity.

Mercifully a heavy rain began falling as the rabbi was forced to interrupt his speech, or else many might have lingered on, debating, arguing, berating each other and possibly even battling. Even so knots of irate people carried on heated discussions along the wet sidewalks of Hunter College. Then there was a strange silence about the street.

While the arguing was on and the agony of disappointment, the rabbi was back in the room of his hotel, a man alone, probably wondering about the hardships in the graversing of the roads.

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