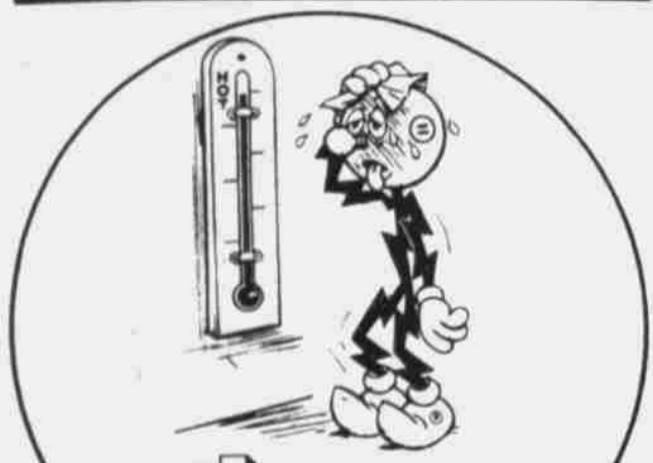


# No Time for Laughter

BY RABBI JACOB J. HECHT

(EXEC. V.P., NATL. COMM. FURTHERANCE JEWISH ED.)

Several months ago a full-page advertisement appeared in the NEW YORK TIMES showing a group of smiling people, below which was a



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headline, which said, "So Many Jews Are Wearing 'That Smile' Nowadays."

This advertisement was placed by a bizarre religious sect called "Hebrew Christians" which has accepted Jesus Christ as the Messiah prophesized in the Old Testament.

Composed entirely of ex-Jews who have converted to Christianity, these Hebrew Christians are part of a movement which claims to have as many as 100,000 members in the U.S.

Jews hearing about these Hebrew Christians for the first time have different reactions. Some Jews I know tend to ignore them, feeling that by doing so, they are in effect causing them -- and the problems they create -- to disappear.

Other Jews sluff them off as being some what addle-pated, rationalizing, "Well, they're idiots, and everybody will recognize them for that, so there's nothing to worry about."

While still other Jews I know get furious when they hear about these Hebrew Christians. They shake their fists, saying: "Don't we Jews have enough trouble already without them causing more."

The most intelligent reaction to the Hebrew Christians that I have heard came from a recently Bar Mitzvah boy who heard me talking about the Hebrew Christians, and asked: "Why did these Jews become Hebrew Christians?"

An article on this strange sect published in the NEW YORK TIMES about a week before the "Smile" advertisement offered some explanation of this. Besides giving a brief history of this more than 50-year-old movement, it told the story of Ellen and Ronni Sarrett, two sisters who converted to Christianity as Hebrew Christians.

Both girls grew up on New York City's West Side in a family they described as "culturally Jewish but almost atheistic." Their only formal contacts with Judaism had been one or two visits to a Synagogue and some Passover Seders at their grandmother's.

Their conversion to Hebrew Christianity came while attending Northeastern University in Boston. Ellen, who was studying religion and philosophy, spent, she said, "two weeks of contemplation and going crazy in her dorm room." She came out feeling "saved" and joined the movement shortly afterward.

It would be easy to dismiss Ellen and her sister by saying they were hippies, of the Jewish equivalent of the "Jesus Saves" movement or simply traitors to their religion and their race. Or maybe their defection could be attributed solely to the undoubtedly insidious entrapment by the evangelists of the American Board of Missions to the Jews, whose missionaries for many years have zealously attempted to wean away from Judaism as many Jewish youth and adults as they could.

But if we do not pursue the reason why these girls and others have joined the Hebrew Christians, we cannot really answer the question asked by the Bar Mitzvah boy, and if this question remains unanswered, more and more Jews will be tricked into joining this heretical religious sect.

In my opinion, the significant question as far as the Hebrew Christians are concerned, is: Why did they not become regular Christians, say Baptists, Presbyterian, or Unitarian? Or why did they join any religion at all? Or why did they just not do anything? Or become agnostic? Or an atheist?

It is Ellen and Ronni Sarrett who give us the answer when they said their only exposure to

Judaism had been going several times to the Synagogue and attending a few of their grandmother's seders.

If they had never had any exposure to Judaism they may well have taken another direction and become an agnostic, atheist, or religious do-nothing. But the fact that they did have contact with Judaism, limited as that contact was, obviously left an indelible impression on their minds. Just those one or two visits to the Synagogue and those few seders -- and they were Jews for life, so much so that when they did feel a spiritual urge, they moved in the direction of a religion they thought was Jewish.

We have heard stories of the incredible attraction of the Jewish religion, but I wonder if any more proof is needed to show how dynamic and magnetic our religion really is. So gripping were those few moments of Judaism to Ellen and Ronni they never considered, not even for a minute, that they were anything but Jews.

So it is no wonder that in their quest for spiritual relief and guidance that they gravitated to a sect that convinced them (falsely as it turns out) it was Jewish in nature.

There is another important lesson to be learned from Ellen, Ronni, and the other Hebrew Christians. Namely, that we as Jews are failing our responsibility. Indeed, every Jew who becomes a convert to the Hebrew Christians is mute testimony to that failure.

When Ellen and Ronni were going crazy in their rooms, where were the local Jewish leaders the Jewish Rabbis, and the Jewish teachers who presumably could have helped straighten them out? When they were going to school on the West Side, where were the Jewish leaders and teachers that could have reinforced their Judaism? Where were their Jewish friends? Where was the Jewish Rabbi when they visited the Synagogue, and why did he not interest them in attending more services or a Jewish school? Where were their parents, and why did they not continue the Seder? And why did not the grandparents sufficiently teach their children (the girls' parents) the value of observance and Jewish tradition?

Obviously, although the Hebrew Christians are a divisive force, we cannot blame them completely for what has happened. Rather, as usual, the finger of guilt must be pointed to ourselves or rather to those Jews who neglect their religion and by doing so, help drive others into the hands of Christians or the shadowland of non-Jews. It is we who must set the example, we who must be devout and observant, we who must follow the precepts of Jewish morality and the dictates of Jewish tradition. If we do this, we will be doing a service not only for ourselves, but also for those wavering on the fence on non-belief. More than that, we will be doing an invaluable service for Judaism itself, because then we would be getting at the real heart of the solution -- which is not survival of Judaism, but rather survival of the Jew!

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