

5739-Re-Identification

By Rabbi Samuel M. Silver

Did you hear about the man who said, "Here it is 5738, and I'm still writing 5737 on my checks?"

Here it is almost 5739 and what kind of a year will it be?

Prophecies are for geniuses, fools and gambling addicts. So we will eschew predictions, but we will offer one suggestion for this fresh, new year on which we embark.

An important milestone will occur during the ensuing twelve months and it would be well for it to be properly celebrated.

It will mark the 325th anniversary of the arrival of the first Jews on these blessed shores.

Do you remember the Tercentenary in 1954? It seems only yesterday that nation-wide festivities took place to recall the intrepidity of that handful of castaways who came up from South America, were shipwrecked, and then transferred to another vessel which brought them to New Amsterdam where they were gruffly greeted by Peter Stuyvesant. They were the first Jewish contingent here.

The climatic event of the Tercentenary took

LAS VEGAS ISRAELITE

place in a New York hotel. The speaker was Pres. Eisenhower. In his banquet address he praised the achievements of American Jewry, with a special salute to those in uniform who aided in the victory over Nazism.

But the most dramatic moment at that gala gathering was unscripted. It occurred when a frail man rose and asked to be allowed to say a few words.

He was Irving Berlin, who recently celebrated his 90th birthday. Like other celebrities, Berlin was known to be Jewish, had intermarried, but rarely "worked" at his Jewishness. But moved by the occasion, Berlin wanted the huge audience and Pres. Eisenhower to know of his pride in his Jewishness. He spoke of his father, a cantor, of his early life, and said, in prose, what he has musically expressed in his most famous creation, "God Bless America."

In Yiddish, we have a phrase, "dos pintelev Yid." It means literally the little bit of Jewishness which resides even in the most indifferent. An English equivalent is "the spark of Jewishness."

A milestone can fan that spark, as it did with Berlin, into a flame. The accomplishments of the State of Israel have fueled many a minimalist Jew's sense of identity.

The Berlin episode was duplicated in the case

of Herbert Bayard Swope, whose Jewishness was nil until he was approached to aid Israel in her time of crisis. As recounted in a remarkable autobiography, "So Far," by Meyer Weisgal, Swope called a high government official of Irish ancestry and reminded him that he, Swope, had once helped the Irish. Now, he said, I want you to do something for "my people."

The same sort of thing happened to the late, great Serge Koussevitsky, who had left the faith entirely, but was so stirred by the birth of Israel that he begged to be allowed to direct the Palestine Symphony Orchestra.

Many a person who returns to the synagogue on the holydays feels this tug of re-identification. It doesn't always happen. For that reason many rabbis announce the date of next year's Rosh Hashanah services at the last service for Yom Kippur.

But others are inspired by milestones to a greater awareness of their identity and an eagerness to share in the exciting adventure of being Jewish.

The observance of the 325th birthday of American Jewry will involve reviews of the saga of our people in this splendid country. Perhaps those reviews, added to other meditations during holiday devotions, will energize more of us to play more active roles in the pursuit of goals delineated by the prophets: equity, equality, and international harmony. May it be so.

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