

This Time the Court Says No

BY ROBERT E. SEGAL

Children in the Sioux Falls, South Dakota, public schools are now free to stage the Christmas pageants and sing the carols about the birth of the central figure of the Christian faith without fear of court interference.

The two year fight by the American Jewish Congress, the American Civil Liberties Union and concerned South Dakota citizens ended early in November when the Supreme Court voted 7 to 2 not to hear arguments on the issue. Only Justices William J. Brennan, Jr., 74 and Thurgood Marshall, 72, were willing to hear reasons offered by those fighting to keep the public schools free of religious holiday observances.

This probably brings to an end the long struggle aimed primarily at protecting the faith sensibilities of non-Christian children in the public schools in the holiday season.

In its appeal to the court, the American Jewish Congress contended that the Sioux City guidelines for conducting Christmas observances adopted by the school board were unconstitutional because they had a religious purpose and that they directly advanced religion. "Religion in the public schools, no matter how dressed up or watered down, serve only to harass, hurt, and dislocate children of minority faiths and to impair wholesome classroom relationships," the Congress spokesmen said. "We recognize that Chanukah and Passover have no greater entitlement to observance in the public schools than Christmas or Easter."

It is possible that this holiday hassle might never have arisen had not a few public relations folks decided several years ago that inasmuch as Christmas, under the impact of the commercialization of that profoundly religious festival, should be twinned with Chanukah to better Jewish-Christian relations. The holidays come fairly close together; they afford a fine opportunity to do something in partnership about the winter solstice; so why not make it a double header?

Any competent student of religion would realize at once that this concept was shallow, confusing and capable of precipitating much hard feeling in its community. Christmas is literally the Mass of Christ. During the first three centuries of the Common Era, those early Christians were opposed to the pagan custom of celebrating birthdays. The Nativity was not a festival of the Church. The birth of the central figure of Christianity was logically related to January 6, the keeping of the Epiphany. Not until the triumph of Constantine, not until Christianity became the state religion, was December 25 designated as the birth date now so widely marked by Christians.

Chanukah is something else again. It is the keystone of religious freedom. To celebrate it is to sing a hymn of liberty. It is to keep forever green the memory of the heroic battle by Mattathias and his deeply committed Maccabees to overcome the Syrian empire's vicious efforts to stamp out Judaism some 165

years before the Common Era.

To the valor of the Maccabees the world owes the claim for the right to establish religious faiths reflecting the deepest spiritual impulses as experienced not by one sect alone but by a great variety of people. Early Christian fathers were wise to include the books of the Maccabees in their scriptures.

It's really too bad that the Supreme Court turned down the Sioux City appeal on religious holidays in the public schools. The learned judges might have added to their expansive knowledge. And once again, the precious American concept of keeping inviolate the religious rights of every person in the United States -- including the tiniest ones in kindergarten -- might have scored a victory.

ANTI-SEMITISM MUST BE COMBATTED

DETROIT (WNS) -- The 49th General Assembly of the Council of Jewish Federations adopted a resolution declaring that the increasing anti-Semitic activity in the United States "must be vigorously combatted."

But the resolution also stressed that acts of violence against Jews and Jewish institutions in the U.S. "have not been as flagrant or numerous as those recorded in Europe," nor has it been "linked to a coordinated anti-Semitic campaign." The CJF said that "most Americans continue to reject overt forms of anti-Semitic activity."

"We regard the social climate in our country as inhospitable to anti-Semitism and perceive no likelihood of its imminent eruption on any considerable level." The resolution also expressed solidarity with and support for the Jews in France. The resolution called upon the governments of the United States and Canada "to exert their influence upon the French government to insure the protection of the Jewish citizens of France." All people concerned with a democratic and peaceful world were urged to "take an unequivocal stand against terrorism and resurgent anti-Semitism."

At a panel discussion

of anti-Semitism in the U.S., Joel Ollander, assistant director of the National Jewish Community Relations Advisory Council (NJCRAC), said that anti-Semitism in the U.S. "is like having the flu; it may be uncomfortable, there may be a fever, it may produce headaches, but not pneumonia." He said the reason is that American society "is basically healthy" and the role of Jews within the society has been established in positive ways. Phil Baum, associate national executive director of the American Jewish Congress, said that as long as democracy is strong the likelihood of organized anti-Semitism is negligible. Milton Ellerin, director of the American Jewish Committee's trends analysis division, said terrorism "has become

a political fact of life around the world, and I don't believe we're immune to it here in the United States. He said the best antidote to neo-Nazism "is to make democracy work."

Bernard Attali, a leader of the Fonds Social Juif Unifie in France, told the CJF Assembly that anti-Semitism in France is "the beast that is buried in the French collective unconscious." He said that anti-Semitism in France is due to French politics in relations to Israel, the rebirth of an extremist ideology among French new right intellectuals and the economic crisis which requires a scapegoat.

BE PARENTS NOT FRIENDS

KIAMESHA LAKE, N.Y. -- "Judaism takes an unequivocal stand on being parents and not pals," Francine Klagsbrun, author of "Voices of Wisdom," told nearly 2000 delegates today at the Women's League for Conservative Judaism's National Convention at the Concord Hotel. She discussed a Jewish approach to parent-child relationships in her summation of "Choices," a socio-drama written especially for the Convention. Delegates broke into

small groups and discussed their own reactions to the socio-drama, before hearing Mrs. Klagsbrun's remarks.

"We want our children to feel loved and to love us in return," Mrs. Klagsbrun said. "We don't want to burden them with oppressive rules. But what we forget, because it's easy to forget, is that children feel loved when they feel protected, watched over. And conversely, they feel frightened when they sense that they have too much power over us."

Jewish tradition recognizes the special relationship between parents and children and commands us to honor our parents rather than love them, she said. "But the command to honor your father and mother... is telling us something terribly important. It's telling us that we have to establish a relationship which our children honor and respect, and not just love. We do represent authority -- an authority they need, that directs them in their own lives. We may not abrogate our authority in order to win their love, because once we do, we lose both their love and their respect."

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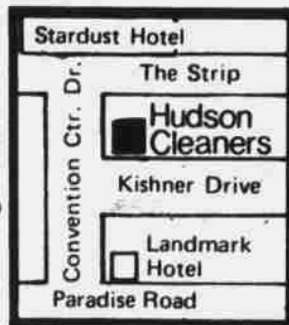
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