

WHAT HURTS THE JEWS

A Jew may be defined by what hurts him.

A youngster comes to my study to explain why he has joined the Church of Scientology. He is filled with newfound importance, with awareness of his own idealism. But he is also exhausted after months of fighting with his parents; he is mystified by their continuing opposition. He wants me to help them understand. He is followed by a frantic woman whose husband has just left her. She hands me a scribbled note, written to her husband by their nine-year-old daughter. "Please daddy come back. I promise I will be good." The woman is terrified, for her own sake, for her daughter's. She wants me to help. She is followed by another, then another still. "Help me," they are saying. "Pay attention to my personal life. I am falling apart. Stop telling me what I can do for the sake of Judaism, for the sake of the synagogue, for Zion's sake, for the sake of mitzvot. Tell me instead, oh tell me, what Judaism can do for me, what the synagogue can do for me, what the Jewish community can do for me, what mitzvot can do for me. Tell me what *you* can do for me, you, rabbi."

What can I say to them? These are not the questions I was trained to answer. I have been raised to speak the language of *r'shut harabim*, the discourse of the public agenda. Neither my home background nor my seminary training prepared me to handle these cries out of the *r'shut hayachid*, from the private domain. Even in my most imaginative moments, I cannot picture my *zayde* sharing his personal anguish with his rabbi, let alone complaining to his rabbi that he lacks spontaneity and craves self-fulfillment. No, my *zayde* and I were raised in the liturgy

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of community.

It is not that liturgy I hear in my study. "Do not look at me as one element in the collective set of a people. Do not look at me as a dues-paying member of this congregation. Look at *me*, in my despairing particularity, in my existential loneliness, in my deadening boredom, in my inability to celebrate, to laugh, to cry, to feel. Help me, here, now. Please."

Rabbi Akiba said, "Kol tzarah shehi shel yachid tzarah, v'chol tzarah she'einah shel yachid, einah tzarah"; every distress of the individual is a genuine distress, but every distress of the community at large is not such a distress. (Devarim Rabbah 2:22) The distress that does not touch the individual is an abstraction. The revolution in values and in expectations which uproots our people brings individual distress. The old sanctities of God, Torah and Israel do not easily address the contemporary trauma. The troubled have no heart for history, eschatology or community.

Our people are hurt; what is it that I can say to them? The answer that comes most readily is this: "Dear friend, I understand your personal needs, your anxieties, your quest for meaning and intimacy. But here in the synagogue we are concerned with other things—with prayer and with ritual observance, with study and the celebrations of weddings and coming of age. For what you want, you must go elsewhere."

And that is precisely where they are going. They go to encounter groups, to growth centers, to human potential movements; to Scientology, T.M., Arica, Synanon, Daytop, Gestalt, Actualizations, Est; they go away.

How tempting to dismiss all this as a regional phenomenon, restricted to the wild and woolly West, specifically to California, well-known for its idiosyncratic madness. But Carl Rogers has characterized the phenomenon of the group encounter as "the most rapidly growing social invention of the century." And how

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tempting to suppose that only handfuls of Jews are involved, only the least resourceful. But the numbers of Jews among both the leaders and the followers of these movements is large, and, statistics aside, I am constantly surprised by the high caliber of the participants.

No, the attraction of so many Jews and such gifted Jews to encounter groups represents a major ideologic and pragmatic challenge to the synagogue and to the ethos of Judaism. For at the heart of these movements is more than another form of therapeutic relief. They signal nothing less than the emergence of new secular religions.

These new religions have their own doctrines of human nature and salvation, their own rituals of confession and their own therapeutic sacraments, gospels of self-fulfillment, charismatic leaders and supportive communities. They offer remission and release. They articulate a new faith in which "theological supernaturalism" is supplanted by "psychological supernaturalism," and classic "prophetic faith," which celebrates what can be and what should be, is eclipsed by what Tillich called "ontological faith," the celebration of what is. And by now many of these once casual enterprises have begun to offer more than convenient therapeutic meeting: they offer an alternative way of life.

What is it that these new religions offer that Judaism does not?

What they offer, or appear to offer, is a readiness, even an eagerness, to answer the questions my congregants now bring to my study, those questions I was not trained to answer, the questions and the pleas of the private agenda, questions and pleas which thousands lay before us—and which tens of thousands do not even bother to bring to the rabbi, to the synagogue, to Judaism.

They go to the new secular religions, ever so much more respectable than the experiments of the youth counter-culture with which we have long since become familiar. But despite the differences in content and in style, the counter-culture and the cults and the

encounters all reflect a harmony of despair: They arise out of a profound discontent with an increasingly impersonal, pressuring society and a yearning for spirituality. They are, in their own ways, resistance movements. And what they resist is the wearing of masks. Away with the masks imposed upon us since infancy! Away with the facade of roles, obligations, duties designed to please others! Away with the tyranny of shoulds that muzzles our personal desires!

And when the Jew resists, he is met with a chorus of accusations—bad son, bad daughter, bad husband, bad wife, bad Jew—a chorus which merely confirms what the rebel already knows: he is to be a nachas-producing machine for others. Outwardly, he is successful, accomplished, perhaps even contented; he is what he is supposed to be. But he feels suffocated beneath the mask, his inner voice muffled. His self is buried under the burden of repression, it twists and turns at the behest of others, it dances to melodies it did not write, its own song is unsung.

Enter the new secular religions, promising to crack the iron mask, to remove the facade. From massages to primal screams, from the shedding of clothes to the breaking in and out of humanly formed circles, the promise is release; the hope is revelation of the inner self; the miracle is the resurrection of deadened affect; the sacrament is the confession of repressed aspiration.

So, a relative—talented, prosperous, educated—explains why he welcomes the savage verbal assaults unleashed upon him when he attends Synanon meetings. It is because the abrasive attacks are such a dramatic contrast to the torpor of his daily existence; they confirm that he is alive, capable still of feeling. A parody here of the shaving lotion commercial in which the brisk slap is gratefully acknowledged: "Thanks, I needed that."

The passion for aliveness, the need for expression in a muted and deafened society, the desire to be unburdened of the anxieties which haunt, the promise of a community

The Jew is to be a *nachas*-producing machine for others.

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which pays attention to the self—all these propel people to search out the intimate community. And it is the intimate community which the new religions claim to offer.

Yes, there are studies which reveal the shallowness, the exaggerated and unsubstantiated claims as well as the outright dangers of many of these new religions of therapy and encounter. There is often hucksterism and commercial exploitation; the voice is the voice of the prophet, but the hands are the hands of the entrepreneur. Behind the promised salvation of self-assertiveness lies the defeat of rationalized narcissism. The message that each of us has his own space and is entitled to do his own thing ends up as *midat Sdom*, the characteristic of Sodom, "mine is mine and thine is thine." The code words "I am responsible for myself and you are responsible for yourself" are less an invitation to community than an endorsement of detachment: "Don't lean on me, don't come to me with your hurts." Impulsiveness, re-titled "spontaneity," is encouraged. The expression of "feeling" becomes a form of adolescent whining ("because I feel like it") rather than a source of compassion and commitment.

When the self becomes a sacred center, the risk is a society of "panthers roaming round in separate cages," snatching at the world with red claws. Preoccupied exclusively with self, the end is hypochondria; one takes one's own temperature a dozen times a day, ever afraid of being "out of touch"—and ultimately immobilized. Above all, the promise of instant community formed out of brief encounter with strangers, the promise of genuine intimacy among people whose lives are not entwined—false promises.

But the success or failure of these groups is not my concern. I do not care whether they are honest or dishonest, meaningful or meaningless. I care about the hunger they promise to satisfy, the hunger which the Jewish religious community does not seem able to relieve. It is small comfort to us that these groups may

be fraudulent; their failure is not our success.

Theirs, we say, is a commitmentless communion. And ours?

Theirs is a skin-deep culture of contacts. And ours?

Have we a more compassionate community to offer our people?

Is there within the synagogue, within the temple "family," a place where the need for emotional honesty can be expressed?

Is there in our midst a group for those who would unburden themselves of the normal crises we all face, a place to find support and relief in confession and in sharing concerns with others?

Can we testify to "peak experiences" in synagogue encounters—at membership meetings, at minyanim, at board meetings, at services? Can we speak of hugging, of embracing others in genuine friendship?

Do we offer our people, from out of the Jewish tradition, some personal wisdom which can help them cope with their agonizing problems? Does our lavish ritual life inform their personal lives, does it really reach them?

Does halachic wisdom enter the crucial private lives of our people?

Or do we dismiss such concerns as aspects of a secular world that is not our concern, that is a matter of private interest only? Do we ask what all this has to do with the *real* agenda of the synagogue, with the keeping of the Sabbath and the dietary laws, with the Jewish public agenda, with the texts our rabbis have studied? Do we make of Judaism yet another mask, a covering for certain days and certain seasons that does not speak to the troubled heart, that does not listen?

That is what Rabbah argued. When his father, Rav Hunna, wondered why his son did not attend the lectures of Rav Hisda, Rabbah replied that he was not interested because Hisda lectured about anatomy and hygiene, *milay d'olmah*, secular things.

To which Rav Hunna responded, "Rav Hisda deals with matters of health and you call them secular matters? All the more reason for

you to attend his lectures.”
(T. Shabbat 82a)

What is the hunger, and how is it that we do not know how to satisfy it? Is it only the weak and the ignorant who are hungry? Then listen:

“I am lonely. Let me emphasize, however, that by stating ‘I am lonely’ I do not intend to convey to you the impression that I am alone. I, thank God, do enjoy the love and friendship of many. I meet people, talk, preach, argue, reason; I am surrounded by comrades and acquaintances. And yet, companionship and friendship do not alleviate the passional experience of loneliness which trails me constantly. I am lonely because at times I feel rejected and thrust away by everybody, not excluding my most intimate friends, and the words of the Psalmist ‘my father and my mother have forsaken me’ quite often ring in my ears . . .”

Who writes these lines? Who is it that so craves personal expression? Who seeks attention to the anxieties of the lonely self? Is it someone far removed from the Jewish community, a stranger to the poetry and wisdom of our tradition?

No, these words come from the writings of *Ish Ha'halacha*, Yosef Baer Soloveitchik, a man deeply immersed in the Jewish community and grounded in the security of the halachah.

Nor is Soloveitchik's cry unique among modern Jewish thinkers. We hear it in the later writings of Hermann Cohen, more fully in the works of Martin Buber, Abraham Joshua Heschel and Franz Rosenzweig. The author of *The Star of Redemption* is not consoled by the vacant smile of philosophy and theology which teaches him that death is merely the loss of the body. “What does philosophy care that the fear of death knows nothing of this division into body and soul; that it bellows ‘I’ ‘I’ ‘I’ and refuses . . . this relegating of fear to a mere body . . .”

What is missing in Jewish life to satisfy the longing of the soul? Is halachah not enough? Is Jewish

ritual not enough? Is Jewish philosophy not enough?

If these learned, pious, Jewish leaders cry out their discontent with the community of Jewish “gesellschaft,” if they seek attention for the shivering self, what may be said of the fears of the individual Jews we serve? And what may be said of the loneliness of those who lead others into community?

The existential torments of Jewish thinkers are less profoundly articulated but not less deeply felt by ordinary Jews. The individuals we serve make up the real personal histories out of which sociologists and psychologists construct the concepts of anomie and alienation. They are part of the statistics of rising divorce rates, rising suicides among college students, rising delinquency rates.

It is not enough to talk theology or halachah or mitzvot or peoplehood to them, not because these people are foolish or irreverent, but because other things press heavy on their hearts and minds and cry for attention.

When you walk in a forest amidst flowers and trees, and a sharp pebble cuts into your foot, you quickly lose your aesthetic sensibilities. People are beset by the tensions between parents and children, the disharmonies of marriage, the dying of parents, the limits of career, the emptiness of their lives in the midst of their abundant possessions. These are not “bad” Jews, but the classic rabbinic categories which divide relationships between man and God, and man and man do not touch their personal anguish. Shabbat, kashrut, t'fillin, liturgy, observances *bein adam la'makom*; Soviet Jewry, Israel, social action, duties *bein adam l'chavero* offer them no “Guide to the Depressed.” What of the interior life, *bein adam l'atzmo*—between man and himself?

In our own times, Abraham Joshua Heschel warned us: “Torah speaks in the language of men. But the sages have overlooked *the man in the Jew*. They gained no insight into his difficulties and failed to under-

What is the hunger, and how is it that we do not know how to satisfy it? What is missing in Jewish life to satisfy the longing of the soul?

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stand his dilemma. Every generation has its own problems. Every man is burdened with anxieties. But the sages remained silent; they did not guide the perplexed and showed no regard for the new problems that arose."

These are Heschel's words; not the words of some unknowing, unfeeling outside critic of the tradition, but the descendant and teacher of rabbis.

The "man in the Jew": Have I, in my desire to search out the Jewishly unique, ignored the humanity of the Jew?

Have I, in my desire to preserve the particularity of Judaism, identified it exclusively—like Moses Mendelssohn—with *geöffnarte gesetze*, revealed legislation, the ceremonial acts of ritual observance, and relegated the personal to the secular, universal order?

Have I, as Heschel charged the *chazal*, the sages, reduced the grandeur and pertinence of Judaism to "Is it permissible or forbidden, is it kosher or not?" And is that what is meant by declaring Judaism as a way of life?

The synagogue must respond to "the man in the Jew," not by muttering the psycho-babble of the popularizers of encounter and not by imitating the facile theology of the new secular religions; but not by ignoring the cry for attention of the man and woman in the Jew. "He who says Torah is one thing and the affairs of the world are another is as if he denies God." (*Midrash Pinchas, chapter IV*)

How are we to begin? We have been called people of the book, but it will not happen by books alone. There is no dearth of texts in Jewish life; there is a dearth of persons. I mean by this no anti-intellectualism, any more than the founder of the *Frankfort Freies Judisches Lehrhaus* meant to denigrate Jewish literature when he declared "Books are not now the prime need of the day. What we need more than ever are human beings, Jewish human beings."

Jews need Jews to be Jewish. Jews are hungry for the warmth and

sympathetic intelligence of other Jews. Most Jews within the synagogue and outside the synagogue are not comfortable with Sanctuary Judaism. I speak not of the Jews of the "daily minyan" but of the overwhelming majority of our Jewish constituency: the affiliated, the unaffiliated, the disaffiliated. They are fearful of their ignorance and of their doubts about being Jewish. They have questions of all sorts—questions so elemental that they are embarrassed to raise them publicly. They are fearful of the institution.

Some remember the humiliation of being called for an aliyah and then stumbling and muttering the benedictions, and rejoicing when the *ba'alkriyah* drowned out the stammering with a loud "amen."

Some remember hearing the rabbi speak about the beauties of the Shabbat and are ashamed to ask which comes first, the *kiddush* or the *Motzi* or the lighting of the candles.

Some remember hearing about the *Brit Milah* and are confused about the mystery and complexity of the rite that entails surgery and blood, *mohel*, *sandek*, *kvater* and *kvaterin*.

They wonder what the fuss is all about; what difference—philosophical, moral, psychological—could it make whether it is the eighth day or the third day, or whether it is a *mohel* or a doctor who performs the surgery.

Some wonder what great principle attends the *kohen's* questioning the father *mai bait tefay* at the *pidyon ha-ben* and the father's declaration that he prefers his first-born son to the five silver coins on the plate. They titter at the ceremony and now it is I who am embarrassed.

The "nice" ones do it for the sake of grandparents or for the sake of the children. The others simply skip over it. But both the nice ones and the others are not convinced that there is personal wisdom in these acts. The "nice" ones join but then remain hidden behind the skirts of the community, affiliate only to melt into the anonymity of the congregational crowd, pretend that

belonging is enough, attend a few services or public lectures to assuage their guilt and mark their public identity. The others cover the embarrassment of their ignorance or doubt by attacks on the vulgarities of institutional religion and the high cost of affiliation. In any event, both remain unreached, ignored and ignorant.

Their fears and fantasies about the synagogue and Judaism will keep them from the rabbi. Who can touch them? Who will reach out to them, person to person? Who will talk with them? Who will befriend them?

Neither books nor scholars in residence nor adult education classes can touch these frightened Jews who represent the major constituency of our Jewish community.

Nor can the rabbi himself, however conscientious, meet their needs. For what they crave is intimate, personal, non-threatening supportive relationship with Jewish persons. And speaking for myself, I know I have neither the energy nor the time to personally satisfy their real need.

Is there no one upon whom we can call to help us fill the vacuum of Jewish feeling and spirituality? Have we no allies to help us personalize and humanize the tradition: to relate personally to the married couples so attended to on the day of the wedding and so neglected after the honeymoon is over; to relate personally to the newly affiliated families who would be ready to create a Jewish ambience in their homes; to counsel personally with expectant parents confounded by half-superstitious rumors they pick up about the naming of the child and the ceremonies of *Brit* and *Pidyon*; to help the proselyte in our midst, so uncertain of his or her way in the synagogue and in Jewish life; to assist in the forming of a *havurah* and enriching its life? Or is this all to fall upon the rabbi's shoulders, and then because no single person can attend to this, is it to gnaw away at his conscience?

We are not so helpless or alone. There are Jews within our syn-

agogues who want to do more with their lives than attend public lectures or sit at endless meetings or usher. There are Jews who can understand the challenge to Jewish life and would respond to a call to serve Jewish life; would respond to a serious program based upon classic Jewish purpose: *I'haskil lishmoa u'l'lamed, lishmor v'laasot*—to understand, to listen, to learn in order to teach, to observe and fulfill in love all the teachings of Thy Torah.

I propose for consideration a program which each rabbi can undertake individually or in partnership with other colleagues—for the training of Judaic paraprofessionals.

—A program, under rabbinic supervision, for the training of lay men and women willing to tithe their talents and energy for the purpose of entering the lives of our fellow Jews who can only be reached personally by their peers.

—A paraprofessional Judaic program to help us transmit, on a personal level, the Jewish art of celebration, Jewish *chochmah* for their personal lives and for the lives of their families.

Consider the emergence in the last few decades of paraprofessionals of all kinds. Paramedical, paralegal, paraprofessional psychological counselors, lay people, trained so as to extend the influence of the professionals in the community and to help the professionals use their energy and talents more effectively. Why not para-rabbis? Is the rabbinic vocation less demanding, less complex, less worthwhile than these others? Does Judaism need no help? Do rabbis need no help?

There is much untapped energy and idealism in our laity. For the sake of Judaism and our sacred tasks, that laity cannot be allowed to remain as passive critics, spectator and audience outside the circle of commitment. They must be brought into our confidence, to share the gravity of our calling and to help us. We cannot afford to continue the distance which grows between us. Rabbis need allies. We need collegiality with our laity.

I, a rabbi, am relegated to the role of ritual functionary along with the caterer, florist, photographer and leader of the band.

I do not present this proposal on theory alone. Some five years ago, I witnessed in my own congregation the formation of a paraprofessional counselling service, comprised of synagogue laity, and trained for two years by psychiatrists and social workers. Thirty-four of them, supervised by professionals—psychiatrists, psychologists, family counselors—all who volunteer their services, and service the congregation and community within the walls of the synagogue. Their altruism, their desire to learn in order to help, has gained for the synagogue new credibility as a community which cares about the man and the woman in the Jew.

Based on that model and on that experience, I have recently initiated a para-rabbinic program comprised of 26 lay synagogue members, mostly drawn from the Board of Directors.

They have committed themselves to a two-year program of study and to three additional years of service to the congregation. We chose for the first year of study the *rites of passage* for two major reasons.

A) Because there are few moments in the life of a Jew and in his family wherein the observance of Jewish mitzvot have so much wisdom to offer them personally; and

B) Because I have seen in my rabbinic career the tragic waste of opportunity to transmit Jewish values to our people. I confess that inadvertently but undeniably I have stood by to see mechanical routinization lay its dead hand upon the rites of passage. I have allowed the rite to become isolated from the living passage so that what remains of my rabbinic role has to do with answering questions about technique: where, how, when. I have provided no occasion or time to explain the new stages, the new turning points which such rites of passage celebrate.

It is not for naught that the *Brit* is known to them as a circumcision, a surgical procedure, not as the child's covenant with God.

I have insisted that those divorced by civil authorities go to the Bet Din

because there the religious community expresses its spiritual and moral sensitivity and wisdom. Does the Bet Din—the rabbinic council—deal with the emotions and ethics of separation, the responsibility toward the separated partners, toward the children and their education, toward the rebuilding of life—or is its justification satisfied with the punctilious writing of the twelve lines and the proper presentation of the scribe and witness? And do I hope thereby to convince Jews that a *get* is qualitatively different from a civil divorce?

Illustrations can be quickly multiplied of the neglect and perversion of Jewish spirituality when the rite is reified and the passage unobserved. The rites have nothing to do with the passage. Jews are not being instructed how to cultivate the Jewish virtues which attend each stage in the development of the Jewish human being. But life passages without rite passages are blind. Rite passages without life passages are empty.

I read the literature of contemporary psychologists, e.g., Erik Erikson, Daniel Levinson, Roger Gould, and I am jealous for Judaism. For it is they, the "secularists," who in dealing with the life cycle wrestle with the spiritual and moral "virtues" of the growing self. It is they who discuss the need for basic trust, the balanced self, fidelity and ideological commitment, generativity and altruistic concern. It is they who deal with the passages, turnings, crises of the journey. It is they who are physicians of the soul, and I who have become a master of customs and ceremonies. It is I who am relegated to the role of ritual functionary along with the caterer, florist, photographer and leader of the band.

It is not my fault. I am overwhelmed and outnumbered. The attribute of omnipresence belongs to God alone. I need, rabbis need, allies in the sacred task of creating Jews. We need Jewish persons to relate personally and sympatheti-

cally to other Jews. We need Jews who can listen to other Jews and who can help them anticipate the kinds of concerns they will confront at the critical junctures of their lives. The ritual can be redeemed from perfunctory enactment when it is preceded and followed by living contact with Jews who care.

It will not be accomplished by noble urgings but it can be achieved by personal engagement; not by abstract rationale but by concrete doing. For people believe what they do, more than they do what they believe; people feel what they do, more than they do what they feel.

Judaism is doing. So let Jewish consciousness be raised and internalized through personal encounters between para-rabbinic counselors and expectant parents weeks before the ritual choreography of *Brit* and *Pidyon*; through Jews who are trained to explain the moral and spiritual presuppositions articulated through the rites; through personal meetings with the families about to celebrate Bar and Bat Mitzvah, which will deal not only with the logistics of the event but with some of the constant concerns of parents and adolescents in their transitional stages; through personal sessions with engaged couples to discuss etiquette of the wedding and the theology and morality of consecrated love; through personal involvement in assisting the mourner in arrangements for the funeral and attention to the grieving period.

The synagogue today is challenged by the secular religions to create a community of personal concern centered around the mitzvot of every Jew's life-passage.

In an age of loneliness, the synagogue has a golden opportunity to make of Jewish rites of passage the consequences, the celebratory outcome of Jewish activity, Jewish activity in which Jews as Jews help Jews through the normal crises which attend the stages of personal and family growth.

The man in the Jew and the Jew in the man needs a compassionate ear, a responsive spirit, an informed intelligence in which to confide. *