

Bernie and Bridget-The Trivialization of Judaism –

A Sermon by Rabbi Harold M. Schulweis

(This is a transcription of an audio recording which can be found at www.schulweisinstitute.com)

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Rabbi Schulweis: Alike is number seven in the history of all American stage performances, 2,327 stage performance of AB Cyrus Rose. But, now we are given a little bit of temporary relief and we owe to this also a Black man who is going to be the ultimate taxicab driver with Bernie. And, then, just think who is in the *Mishpachah* of the Jewish Mechutanah. We have a son who is a father and that is an absolute must. We have a priest.

Now, what we need is an easy identification. Because you fellows have to understand that all the family which is so successful has an easy identification that represents in one sense, simply that we all assume is the case with a lower class blue collar worker American. Everybody knows an archi, everybody knows a dingbat this is simply that is absolutely universal. And so, we are going to call the Catholic girl Bridget, Jewish boy one we call a Jewish boy, we call him Irving. Can't call him Irving because who have to, you call him Bernie, Bernie and Bridget. Now that's an alliteration. That's an alliteration that's a litigation.

What do you mean that's a litigation? Don't give me all that moralistic business. First of all I want you to know that religion in America is pretty dead. Catholic Churches and what it used to be, as far as Jews are concerned, you know Jews are very liberal. And they're very permissive and they know how to laugh at themselves so we'll have no difficulty at all.

But, what you need, most important is you need typicality. You need something that the mass ordeals of some 30, 40, 50, 60 million Americans will immediately identify. And, so, what we'll do is we're going to call the Jewish family Steinberg, that's a good name. Now, we're going call the Catholic family Fitzgerald. And then, we go to put them into a local habitat and then someone says, "How about a delicatessen?" I say, "Ah, that's it." How much more Jewish can you possibly get.

Then a combination of chopped liver and gefilteh fish and corned beef and salami and lots of bagels. I mean, just can't you see it. You know, to be a great, great Gant right in the city. Mama Steinberg saying to father Fitzgerald, "Can I make you a little bit of warm chicken soup?" It will be hysterical, they'll laugh it up.

Now, somebody has to write a thesis. Very important psycho-analytic thesis also a literary thesis on the reason why the popular image makers of our society, when they

portray a Jew are insistent that there be food placed prominently as a badge of identification. I say this with great seriousness. I sometimes, when I read Philip Roth or Bruce Jay Friedman and see the movies, I wonder if Gentiles eat.

A few decades ago it used to be suffering that was the badge of identification. But, today the commonality, what we all have in common is food. In Portnoy's Complaint, for example, papa's terrible diseases were related to food. Mama complains about the Gentile hamburgers and French fries. An Alex Portnoy culture of hero when he describes the Jew he describes, and I now quote, "The dark Jewish body as undigested hot pastrami."

And in his anti-Gentile soliloquy when he indicates great vindictiveness, great vengefulness, he speaks of hating the gory and eating him too. Now, that's a very interesting phenomena because you have here a curious admixture that I will argue. For those of you who would like to do a thesis, is a combination of hostility, aggressiveness, sexuality and consumption.

In Goodbye Columbus as well. You have, for example, the detailed description of Patinkin Frigidaire in the basement which is bulging with fruit. And, of course, the wedding scene which is a culinary gorgy of gluttony. In the Heartbreak Kid which Bruce Jay Friedman wrote, we have the Jew who is so immediately tight because she enjoys Milky Way and she enjoys large mounds of egg salad for breakfast.

I think this is an accident. You think it is so happy that each time you picked up a contemporary book which tries to deal with the American Jew, that you find such an emphasis upon eating and upon food. I don't think so. And I want to suggest to those who are going to write this thesis that they begin by reading the New Testament and especially in section in the Book of Philippians in which Paul refers to the Jews and the God of the belly.

And, then, I want him to look up a particular book which was very influential. Published in 1841 by Ludwig Feuerbach called *The Essence of Christianity*. In which, Feuerbach tries to contrast the culture of Greeks as opposed to the Judean culture. And he writes the Israelites open to nature only the gastric sense. Their taste for nature lay only in the palate. Their consciousness of God impeding matter. The Greeks adore nature. The Israelites did not rise above the alimentary view of the average.

Now, there is not point here arguing because that might not function. I should tell Feuerbach and those who follow Feuerbach, why don't you look at the 150 chapters of the Book of Psalms that is simply a replete rudiment with the kind of appreciation of nature or the soul of souls. But, it seems that there's something much deeper here. Because, for those who are haters of the Jewish tradition. Those who hate Jews and Judaism, eating becomes the mark of Judaism because eating is the quintessence of egoism.

Eating is the accumulation of matter. The hoarding of energies within the body. My body, my acquisitive self. The exploitation of the universe. The devouring and the shooing up of nature without any consideration for the aesthetics. The beauty of nature without any altruism whatsoever. Therefore, they say the Jew and Judaism in the Old Testament has its little concern for altruism and so little of asceticism in the tradition and of this world.

I am not suggesting now that Bruce Jay Friedman or Philip Roth or the writers of Bernie and Bridget read Feuerbach or the Book of Philippians. What I'm trying to tell you that the full stereotype is not coincidental to the whole logic of that program and to the denigration and defamation of Judaism. You see there is a logic behind the delicatessen habitat of the Steinberg's because the ideological premise, and I hope you understand, that there are awful lot of serious things that I said in jest. That perhaps the most serious things that we say to each other are said in a humorous fashion.

There is an ideology behind this comedy and that is that mixed marriages are good and that any form of inter of opposition to mixed marriage is really silt. This is not simply comedy, this is advocacy. But, what is the opposition to the mixed marriage? There can't be any opposition to mixed marriage. Just as in the Heartbreak Kid there is no drama, there is no opposition from the boy marrying first in Jewish wedding and then Episcopalian wedding.

There can't be any opposition because if Judaism is an aroma, if Judaism is a scent, if Judaism is a snow, if Judaism is a taste, if the essence of Judaism is delicatessents. Who can utter a word against the love of two people? So, the emphasis on food as the distinguishing and characteristic mark of Judaism is that which enables the authors to trivialize Judaism. To make it so inconsequential, to make it so unimportant that there cannot be any kind of intellectual or ideological or deep opposition to the withering away of the religious distinctiveness.

For the sake of food am I going to keep Bernie and Bridget away? On the contrary, au contraire, what is really mixed marriage? It has virtues, it is the merger of menus. The Steinbergs eat. The Fitzgeralds drink. You now have a wonderful merger. Scotch and soda on the rocks. Bagels and bacon. And that is precisely what we underline and consistent logic of most of the episodes are like.

For example, in the inevitable Hanukah and Christmas sequence, Bernie and Bridget arranged to have a Christmas tree in one room and a Hanukah menorah in the other. Holly and Holly. And in the Episode Number 5, when the Steinberg's win a trip to the Vatican, the only thing that they can think of presenting to his Holy Eminence is, of course, a jar of chicken soup. It is hysterical if you're not Jewish and if you're not Catholic.

They wouldn't think of bringing a scroll of Esther, a Torah, a mezuzah, a menorah. I wonder what they do in Rome, the Steinberg's. The author of the Steinberg's. They're taken to the ark of Titus where there is a wonderful inscription, wonderful depiction of

the Jews who are taken as slaves in the first century by the Romans. Captives crying and weeping. And, all of the temples despoiled and there a caption Judea vanquished, captured and destroyed.

Indeed, the premise of the entire Bridget and Bernie series is that if you take Judaism seriously, if you take religion seriously, this is going to lead to the erosion of the marriage. Thus, you remember in Episode Number 10, where Bridget seeks to become Jewish and is concerned with the rituals, with the lighting of the candles. The Steinbergs bring them a Rabbi. A Rabbi that must have been a leftover from one of Woody Allen's old pictures.

Grotesque, pious medieval garb. An ugly, ugly man and in this clown-like configuration he tries to teach her and she becomes more Jewish and then Bernie protests and says, "Now look I didn't marry a sexy *shiksha* to get a Kosher turkey." I want to have you understand once again how important the food metaphor is. The mixed marriage, of course, is trivial once you deculturize Judaism and Christianity.

If, in Catholicism the authors are insensitive to sacrament, to the notion of sin, salvation, redemption. There are no saints. There are no martyrs. If, as a writer there isn't Judaism, no concern for ethical sensibility. No fidelity to a value system. No sense of community. If there is nothing sacred. If there is no history. If there is no *kadish*, and there is no mass. There is no *kiddishm*. There is no Eucharist. If there is no passion and there is no *Kashi* and there is no Easter, then, of course, mixed marriage raises no questions whatsoever.

I'm waiting for the episode when Bridget gives birth to a baby boy. Because, I am going to submit to them a wonderful scenario. It's going to be called the *Mohel* and the Monsignor. I will then have a *Mohel* dressed in a white doctor's kind of a coat and a Monsignor, of course, in black vestments. And, this series will be called *The Brisk Baptism*. A mark of circumcision and crucifixion which is hallowed by a wafer and a bagel. And we name him Aaron Erin and Steinberg will say, "Down the hatch," and Fitzgerald will say, of course, l'chaim.

It's all very simple and very trivial and it's very cheap universalism. If you reduce your Jewish as belly juice. If the theology is pot-and-pantheism then it's all trivial. Thus it is that in Number 4 or Number 3 in the episodes, we have a Rabbi with a *tamutz* with a *tallis* and the *yamaka* and a robe next to a catholic priest, be thou consecrated unto me in accordance with the Law of Moses and of Israel.

The television my friends, is a powerful instrument. There are 60 million Americans every week that listen to these programs which happen to be back to back with "All in the Family" and the Bridget Loves Bernie show. Men, women and children in primetime. And as you know education you need models and television provides you with models. And, those models are legitimizing agencies.

If in the commercials in order to sell a commodity, you need some celebrity some attractive sports literally figure or Hollywood star, it is because Hollywood and television understands that it is the personality and the model that is the endorsement. And however you put it, Bridget and Bernie, who are very attractive young men, man and woman, these represent an endorsement. Of course, they see it trivia, as trivia. Because, when you falsify, when you vulgarize, when you create straw men filled with *kishka* but without heart and without soul and without mind, it is easy.

And I am unhappy with this because I as a Jew know the agony and the pain of Christian and Jewish parents who are neither bigots nor gluttons nor fools. Who love their daughters and their sons, but, who know that Judaism without Jews means the death of 4,000 years of religious civilization. And, what concerned, lest there be a liquidation of the dreams and of the aspirations and of the achievements of a people who have lived through hell. Who have struggled through all of the fame, who have struggled through inquisition, who have struggled through persecution, who have suffered and lived through crematoria in order to preserve the wisdom the ethic the faith and through this, they have remained sane in an absurd universe.

And now, I am upset because, not only of the Jewish parent, but, I am concerned for the catholic tradition as well. Because, I as a Rabbi, have witnessed the agony of catholic parents who could not bring themselves in Oakland to come to a wedding of their daughter whom I had converted. Out of their own deep catholic Christian legitimate convictions they could not enter the synagogue. And I recall that evening. I officiated at the wedding. And, after the wedding I recall this wonderfully sensitive converted girl rushing into my arms and crying because she recognized that there is no need of the father nor mother nor brother nor sister and saying, "Rabbi you are the only relative I have here."

I officiated at the funeral of a woman, a catholic woman, whom I converted. I officiated her funeral. And I recall her catholic parents coming down for that *levaya*. I'm feeling so absolutely estranged and inconsolable because a Rabbi could not console their grief which could only be understood in the context of Catholicism. These were not silly, stupid, comical, vulgar, obese, fat, materialistic people. These were people who had a sense of values and a sense of history and a sense of tradition.

I'm incensed because the writers are dealing not with something trivial like the preference for a flavor of ice cream. The question of mixed marriage is a question of life and death of a whole civilization. And one has to have a little sensitivity and one has to have a little compassion and one has to have a little understanding and one cannot typecast a whole people and a whole culture.

I am not an enemy of laughter. And I am not an enemy of satire. And I am not an enemy of Yuma. But, I want you to know that not everything that is funny is legitimate. And I want you to know, from my point of view, not everything can be explained in terms of that it makes money or it's funny. There are a lot of funny things like I think of. A lot

of funny situations. Shiloh could be made very funny. And Fagan can be made very funny. And, I could conceive of a script in a situation of a Catholic Priest and his mistress or a Baptist Minister smuggling marijuana. Oh, it can be hysterically funny.

I could see very funny things about Blacks and about Indians and about Mexican Americans. But, I can tell you that we are not living in times when we can afford that kind of ugly ethnic humor because the kind of caricature, the kind of typology the kind of stereotype that humor is simply another that carries the seeds of hate and of lies.

We are living in too volatile, in too pulverized, in too violent, into racist a society. How else to allow this to come back or the Amos and Andy's to come back or Frito Bandito or sitting bull or Jewish characterizations. I wonder of the shallowness and of the banality of those Jewish writers who allowed a picture which was produced by Jews, written by Jews. A picture starring Woody Allen in which a Rabbi is allowed to allegedly express his sexual masochistic fantasies by having a woman half naked beat him. And, then insisting that his wife sit at his feet and be forced to eat pork.

I wonder whether or not in the Jewish community, there isn't left yet a sense of pride and a dignity to say, "Hold it that's not funny, it makes money but it's not funny, it's sick." I feel sick. It is a sickness that is contagious and it spreads and it contaminates and it poisons. I don't want a depiction of a super Jew, of angelic Jews. I happen not to believe in the chosen people. But, I must say that not believing of the chosen people does not mean that I am willing to accept the vilification of our people as if every one of them, every one of them is drawn as herrings from the Steinberg's delicatessen barrel. Every one of them cheap and ugly and empty and valueless.

I wonder sometimes about the Jewish writers, the Jewish producers, the Jewish directors. Have they seen no idealism in us? Have they seen no poetry in us? Have they seen no compassion in the Jewish people? No art, no music, no literature, no intellectuality. Are we only devourers of food? Are we not a people who has gone through such miserable health and has remained remarkably sane and forgiving of all of the adversaries and the enemies that surround us? Who has suffered such sustained and continued anti-Semitism? And is yet remained aware of their responsibilities of the work.

I wonder sometimes, do the authors even of Bridget and Bernie. Can they not understand what is it that makes Bernie want to be a writer so bad? What is it that allows him to befriend a Black man so easily? Is there nothing connected to the Judean tradition. Or must Bernie be characterized as a hater of his paring generation. As a great assimilator.

What follows from all of these? I want to make it abundantly clear that I am absolutely and irrevocably opposed to the notion of boycotting or censoring the programs because in effect could be done. And I think it could be done. I think the remedy is worse than the sickness. But, I believe that Jewish liberalism and Jewish tolerance does not mean

silence. I think we are misleading the Jewish writers who are so assimilated such shallow empty people with such little experience of Jewish life if we keep silent.

I remember if you would mind, a rather humble analogy. A number of years ago when I first came to Oakland I and a number of Rabbis of the community went to see the Superintendent of Schools of Oakland. To complain about the Christological incursions in the public school system. The crutches the carols and the obvious references to Christ as being offensive to Jewish students. And, as this is the Sabbath, he said to us, "Gentlemen, I have been a Superintendent of Schools of Oakland for many, many years. Never have I ever heard that the Jew is sensitive and is concerned about these matters."

It is that kind of silence, it is that kind of lack of dignity which enables people to be misled. I think that we have a right and an obligation to express our sensitivity to these marginal Jews. Because, hopefully, at least an awareness of the thought that there is outside a caring and concerned Jewish community. Who will make some sort of difference, hopefully, in terms of self-censorship and of self-control for the future?

We happen to live in Encina which happens to be in this area. Perhaps, the densest population in which there are found writers and directors and actors and producers in the film industry and in the television industry. And I put it upon the Ethical Actions Committee of this congregation. And I put it upon you who are members of this community to organize together so that we can make representation to those people who are responsible for feeding the cultural image of the Jew out to millions and millions of Americans who learn what they learn about us, mostly as we learn about other people through the popular media.

I don't know if it will help. Maybe it won't help. But, one thing it will do for us, and that's as important as anything else. It will give us self-respect because as our tradition has put it, "Silence is tantamount to consent." And I don't consent. This is not our people and this is not the way to treat the sacredness of our tradition. I protest and I want to lift my voice and I want you to join with me.

So, therefore, that we have convened earlier this week, our Ethical Actions Committee, and before you leave this evening, I hope you will respond to the request of the information of the Ethical Actions Committee of Valley Beth Shalom has drawn up. In which, we ask you to express your feelings if you feel, however you feel to those who are in power and who make very important decisions.

I look forward to meeting with you a little later this evening. And, I appreciate the attention in which you listen to what I have to say.

