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JEWISH LEISURE AND THE SYNAGOGUE

By Rabbi Harold M. Schulweis

The Synagogue wrestles with a phantom. We may intellectualize the arena of our discontent. We may call for no holds barred. But no real contact will be made because the adversary is not an opposing ideology. And it is important that the Synagogue recognize that it is not struggling with Bundist cultural autonomy, or Zhitlovsky's Yiddishist nationalism or a philosophy of purposive assimilation. The Synagogue contends with a program of accommodation. The very ambiguity of Center programming, the very absence of Jewish directives is the source of much of our irritation. The Center is a place for Everyman, a neutral ground in which anything can happen, if you wish it. Stripped of social work jargon, the pose of voluntarism and democratic behavior reveals a normless willingness: we are 'what you would have us. The professionals are paradigm illustrations of the "over-directed." They respond, they cater, they make contacts, they arrange, they coordinate.

One cannot engage in a formal debate against an attitude of unstructured leisurism." One can only estimate motivations, examine jurisdictional proprieties and question the basis of support. It is not with the Hellenism of Plato or Aristotle, but with the Hellenism of the gymnasium that we contend.

Two terms, "leisure" and "meeting the needs of the Jewish Community" are the most frequent root expressions of Center rationale. They are both characteristically ambidextrous. One speaks sprawlingly of leisure time as if all of Jewish life were not comprised of choices of activities within leisure line; as if Synagogue and adult education, Religious and Hebrew schools were not struggling for priority within the Jew's leisure moments. To confine the activities of the Center to the category of "leisure time" is nevertheless an ingenious semantic device wherein the genuine conflict between programs offering Jewish content and those of a general recreational variety may be skillfully eschewed. There is marked strategy in the Center's assignment of its own programming to the more casual area of relaxation. It thus avoids for itself the earnest problem confronting the American Jew: how should the Jew utilize his extra-curricular hours of freedom? For the Jew in a voluntaristic society, the use of his precious leisure moments is the index to the nature of his Jewish identification. His option determines the character of his Jewishness. Furthermore, to segregate oneself voluntarily from the general American community without unique purpose requires some justification. It is a moral problem which normativeless seeks to avoid.

The term "Jewish needs" is equally amorphous. Do we speak here of the "needs" of a Jew which would include, of course, his needs as a human being, or do we have in mind specific "Jewish" needs, those which arise by virtue of his identification with Judaism and the Jewish people? Admittedly, the Jew participates logically in the genus "man;" as he does sociologically in two civilizations. But the Center seems resolved to meet the needs of both

civilizations — the secular American and the Jewish — in one building. Thus the program will include massaging and slenderizing, seminars or contract bridge, charm clinics and photography, a lecture on how to invest in stocks and bonds, how to move on the dance floor along with a course on Jewish cooking, a music concert and a drama to boot. Hath not a Jew arms, muscles aches, pains, dimensions? That one civilization, the dominant one, is all about us — in general community centers, extensions courses, recreation centers, radio, TV, movies — is ignored. It is precisely the dominant American secular civilization, daily encircling the Jewish child and adult, which finds itself most pronounced in Jewish Center programming. Expression of the Jewish civilization is programatically peripheral. At times it would appear to be so because serious Jewish content is willingly relegated to the Synagogue, but more often because there is so little knowledge of or heart for Jewish content and material amongst the social, work professionals. Clearly, "H.M.S. Pinafore" and "Charlie's Aunt" are easier vehicles to produce. Easier for the dramatics coach, Jewishly untrained, and easier for the professional to motivate member of the drama group. "Give them what they think they want." Without energetic effort towards Jewish goals, without a sense of Jewish aspiration the Center continues its Americanization program with the third generation American born. And the Jewish community inherits and accepts uncritically the sancta of institutional anachronism.

Yet it cannot be denied that there is some great appeal in this voluntary segregation and this purposeless ghettoism. Forget for a moment the question of the moral right of such self-insulation from the general community, activities which have no distinctively Jewish purpose in mind; forget for the moment what such programming does to the Jew's concept of Jewishness when "identification" with a people is reduced to Jewishly vacuous activities. What explains the apparently anomalous desire of Jews to be together un-Jewishly? How do we account for this disposition towards Jewish "togetherness — swimming, dancing, playing together — but with the absence of Jewish content? What magnetic forces hold together this contractual Jewishness without content? What lies beyond this institutionalized fallacy of composition wherein "an organization of Jews" is confounded with a Jewish organization, "activity by Jews" is considered as Jewish activity?

To explain Jewish associationism merely on the basis of a fear of latent anti-Semitism is not sufficient. It would explain "togetherness" but not the de-culturation of Jewishness in the content of such association. We are confronted by a newer form of assimilation. This is not the assimilation of by, and for the individual Jew. The Thirties and Forties have long convinced him that escape is fraught with the constant danger of apprehension or total rejection. Realistically, the Jew, as individual, has accepted his unassimil-ability. The Fifties and Sixties, characterized as an age of conformity, discourages the individual Jew from swimming against the tide of approval in his attempt to flow upstream. Ironically enough, he can, as a member of the homogeneous middle-class, escape from the group with the group; he can practice non-conformance through organized conformity. It is not the Jew who assimilates but Judaism which is assimilated; it is not the Jew who melts into cultural anonymity but Judaism which is deculturated. We are confronted by institutionalized collective assimilation.

Standing before us, about us and within us, is the Non-Sectarian under Jewish auspices. The membership is exclusively Jewish, the program and purpose non-sectarian. Comfort, conformity and cosmopolitanism are stamped with the "hekhsher" of identification.

The Church-State Analogy.

Jewish non-sectarianism in the area of institutional polity, functions with a root analogy borrowed from the relationship of Church and State. Consciously or not, the adopted

analogy encourages a view of the Synagogue as the counterpart of the Church, and the Jewish Community as that of the State. By extending the principle of the separation of Church and State to the Jewish Community, a strange logic of allocations emerges. For just as Federal aid to parochial schools is deemed unconstitutional, so financial support towards the religious needs of the Jewish Community, such as the Synagogue's educational activities, is considered out of bounds. It is particularly tragic in those communities where allocations tend to be assigned preferably to non-denominational, neutral, secular agencies as a consequence of such analogical thinking. Jewish education and its councils, insofar as they are so integrally bound with the Synagogue's school system, find themselves in most communities struggling against the grain of such non-sectarian dispositions, Programs with a religious ideological commitment disqualify themselves by virtue of their alleged "sectarianism." It is quite natural then for the Center which is neutrality personified to retain its privileged status as primary beneficiary of locally allocated funds.

The bogey of a theocratic Jewish Community, drawn from the Church-State analogy, encourages the half-hearted acceptance of ecclesiastical authorities, namely the rabbis, who are arms length from de effecting communal planning and allocations. Jewish clergy is best placed at the end corners of the banquet dais, reserved for invocations and benedictions, much in the manner in which the State uses chaplains in the House or Senate.

So deeply internalized is this Church-State analogy amongst Jewish non-sectarians, that even when individuals coming from the ranks of the Synagogue come to occupy leadership in Jewish communal organizations, they are soon taught to feel that communal aid to the educational activities of the Synagogue marks a parochial attitude. That the Synagogue in most communities, is responsible for almost all of the formal education of the community's young citizens, is largely ignored. Jewish non-sectarianism renders the Synagogue a private, provincial affair; and by the principle of exclusion, the interest of the Jewish Community is now equated, de facto, with the interest of those services unaffiliated with religiously oriented life. Consequently, loyalty to the Synagogue is depicted as, in some sense, in conflict with loyalty to the overall community, much along the lines of the dialectic held to exist between humanitarianism and denominationalism, universalism and particularism.

In one fell swoop Jewish non-sectarianism misreads the historical and sociological character of the Jewish Community, penalizes the dominant religious community and neutralizes the Jewish programming of our agencies. As long as this distorted analogy persists, so long will the religious and educational programs for Jewish life suffer the status of tolerated peripheral interests. Such specious thinking, as we have pointed out, has made serious inroads in much of Jewish organizational life. It is used as a justifying crutch for countless quasi-Jewish causes, from hospitals to universities, whose auspices are biologically Jewish in their constituency, while ideologically non-sectarian. The non-sectarian end justifies the "Jewish" means.

And what are we to do about this, we who advocate the voluntarism and pluralism of Jewish life in America? We must accept the right of Center programming. We ourselves have the right, however, to challenge the position of economic priority which the Center holds today upon Federation allocations of local needs. We have a duty to point out that the initial function of the Y's and Centers which served as a place to keep the juveniles off the street and to eliminate the accent of our new immigrants is no longer valid applied to middle class American Jews. Unmindful of the Center's functional anachronism, the Jewish community has passively accepted the economic priority of the Center as immutable. There is no reason for the Center to be treated other than the way the Synagogue or B'rith or Hadassah is treated, as far as Federation's local allocations are concerned. As it stands today, the Center

movement is an autonomous: body and should receive its support from those who believe in its programming. In this wise the purported need claimed for the Center can be tested in a pragmatic manner.

We must encourage and support whatever Jewish programming is done within the Center, with the same enthusiasm that we endorse such programming in all the Jewish organizations. But we must be understood not to be arguing merely negatively for the elimination of the Center as an automatic major beneficiary of local communal funds, but affirmatively for supporting those agencies which cry out for primacy and priority in terms of the cultural moral and religious health of the Jewish community. It would result, if successful, in the inversion of the whole scale of allocation provisions and place its major weight behind the agencies of Jewish education.

For the Synagogue, for the religious community, our criticism entails a deeper struggle within. In our frustration with the Center's programme, we may sophisticate the struggle, falsely I believe, as one between secularism and religion. We may, as Nathan Glazer suggests in his "American Judaism," introduce a distinction between "Jewishness" and "Judaism" which would be untrue to the civilizational character of Judaism. To think along these lines is to fall victim to Jewish non-sectarianism which relies upon a misapplication of Church-State relations to Jewish communal life. For the Synagogue such bifurcating categories are schizophrenic. The Synagogue, should it succumb to such thinking, would become totally Protestantized. The Center would then become civilization without Judaism, and the Synagogue would be reduced to an emaciated Judaism without civilization. It is mandatory for us to retain the uniqueness of Judaism, which is found in the inextricable binding of people, culture, ritual and faith. There is no Episcopalian folksong and no Methodist folkdance. There is Jewish folksong and there is Jewish folkdance. And the Synagogue must reflect the richness and variety of Jewish expression, and the congregant must experience Judaism through all his senses. The Synagogue of today is not yesterday's "Shtibl." Its heterogeneous membership does not muffle the voice of its religious message, but intensifies its relevance by enlarging its scope of responsibility.

That the Jewish community is in need of a binding and unifying force we have not denied. We have argued that the Center is the wrong "shadchan" for such a union. If the Synagogue is ever to play that role, and it is best qualified to do so, it must cleanse itself of the latent divisiveness which infests the campus of the religious community. If the Center is not to exploit the Synagogue's tendency towards denominationalism, we must as a Jewish religious community take concerted action to meet the real needs of the Jew Jewishly. No Synagogue within the community can, or ought to; do it alone. Local synagogue councils, local Boards of Rabbis must utilize and pool the existent facilities of the Temples. Synagogues must jointly engage youth leader personnel who understand the Jewish purpose behind these informal activities, meant to deepen the roots of loyalty and values in Jewish soil.

A national Rabbinic Commission on Inter-Congregational Jewish Youth Activity and Inter-Congregational Adult Education is one of the requisite steps in combatting the pampering, which passes for Jewish programming, recreationalism which passes for Jewish identification, and non-sectarian fund raising under Jewish sponsorship which passes for vital Jewish living. The Center has prospered by default. Only disillusionment with the Synagogue community will strengthen its hand.