THE VOICE OF ESAU

HAROLD M. SCHULWEIS

WE WERE NO STRANGERS to each other. We had worked together before on committees, we espoused similar causes. He felt he knew me well enough to relate an "inside story."

"Did you hear the one about the four who went to heaven—a Catholic, a Protestant, a Negro and a Jew? Well, the angel asked the Catholic what he wanted, and he asked for a large mansion. The angel granted his request. So the Protestant was asked his request and was granted a yacht and golf course. Then the Negro was approached and he asked for a million dollars. Finally, the angel approached the Jew and asked him to name his wish. 'Tell me,' the Jew asked, 'are there many Negroes here?' The angel nodded. 'And are they all granted that much money?' The angel nodded again. 'Well, then,' the Jew said, 'just you give me the names and addresses of those Negroes, I'll take care of the rest.' "

I didn't laugh, and the man who told it didn't intend for me to laugh. The teller of that "inside story" was a Negro, a lawyer, a prominent member of a civil rights organization here in Oakland, and he told it not to amuse me but to let me know how things were.

Tears and Chains

I looked at him as if I were seeing him for the first time. I reminded him that I was a Jew, of the six million of my people who had been decimated by the Nazis, and of the kinship of suffering between us. Nothing availed. He stopped me short. "Listen, we're tired of all that. I'm not talking to you about Europe. I'm talking about us, here and now in the United States of America. You American Jews can't even imagine what it means to be humiliated, can you? Just don't fool yourself into forgetting that you're white. . . . . And don't tell me about slavery and Pharaoh and Egypt. That's three thousand years ago. I heard you describe how you use salt water instead of tears, and horseradish as a symbol of bitterness. Well, White Brother, we don't use symbols. We use tears for tears and the gall of our wretchedness is bitterness enough. And don't tell me about the success of your people and pulling yourself up by your bootstraps. Chains are not bootstraps, Brother. Don't compare yourself with us. When your people came to the United States, the country was in the midst of a great economic expansion. There was a need for manpower then. Not so today—with automation and unemployment on the rise."

It was all pent up in him. He hissed something about Jewish landlords, Jewish merchants, and Jewish exploitation, then the diatribe was cut off.

Jewish Commitment to the Negro Cause

I was taken aback by his anger toward me and mine. I didn't answer him. I didn't recognize him. But I said to myself "What's wrong with that Negro anyway? What's he got

against me and my people? Why does he say 'Jew' with such hostility? Was it a Jew who kidnaped his ancestors and put them in iron shackles? Did my 'zaydeh' own a slave? Or did my uncle lynch a Negro? *'Zo Torah v'zo s'kharah'?* Is this the reward for Jewish commitment to the Negro cause? Doesn't he know that Arthur Spingarn, the president of the NAACP, is a Jew, and that Kivie Kaplan, the national chairman of its membership, is Jewish? Did he forget that Julius Rosenwald spent millions to build Negro colleges and provide Negroes with scholarships? I'll bet he went to one of those schools himself. Doesn't he know of the number of Jewish college students in CORE and SNCC, who went down to the South and risked life and limb? Doesn't he know that Goodman and Schwerner, murdered and dead in the red clay of Mississippi, were Jews? Doesn't he know of the rabbis who went to the South, and those who were beaten up? Who marched to Washington in such great numbers but the leaders of American Jewish organizations? Doesn't he know that Jewish welfare institutions didn't follow the movement of Jewish neighborhoods—but stood their ground; that Jewish hospitals like Mt. Sinai and Michael Reese in Chicago, and Mt. Sinai in New York, have more Negro clinic and bed patients than Jews?" And all the while I could hear the taunting voices of my "Yes on 14"* congregants who knew it all along and now could tell me so.

I repressed that exchange because I would not have it interfere with the cause we hold in common. But this past summer, when the Watts riot exploded, the memory of that submerged clash rushed to the fore. I read that ⅔ of the businesses destroyed in Watts were owned by Jews; 500 of the 750 stores looted and burned. And when the Los Angeles Jewish Community Relations Council issued a release assuring us that no anti-Semitism was involved in Watts, I had that uncanny feeling of certain doubt.

Black Anti-Semitism

The *San Francisco Chronicle* carried an interview with a Negro from Watts which later was widely quoted. The Negro was quoted as saying, "They put the NAACP stickers in the windows and they pat us on the back and they say 'We know how it is to be persecuted!' But every day they put the money in the sack and get in their Jewish canoes—those damned Cadillacs—and drive away to Beverly Hills."

There it was—black anti-Semitism. "Give us the names and addresses, we will do the rest."

Now the unexpected depth of Negro anti-Semitism caved in upon me from all sides. I read an address by Dean Horace Mann Bond, describing an interview with Jeremiah X, a black Muslim leader in the Atlanta Temple. He quoted the latter as follows: "As a Muslim, the Jews are the Negroes' worst enemies among the whites . . . we regard him as the real devil of the Bible where it is said 'Those who say they are Jews but are not, but are of the synagogue of Satan.' They infiltrate the Negro neighborhood with stores and they exploit the Negro more than any other white group. Housing, food, clothing —controlling the three basic things Negroes need. Jesus said (John 8:44) the Jews were devils; we Muslims

* To maintain right to segregated housing.

cannot have more love from them than Jesus had."

Richard Wright tells of Negro distrust of the Jews as a cultural heritage, and Louis Lomax, recipient of the Temple's first Ethical Actions Award, writes in his *Negro Revolt* that mounting Negro anti-Semitism is "due more to the presence of Jews as 'merchants and bill-collectors in the bedevilled Negro ghetto.' "

James Baldwin in *Notes of a Native Son* spelled it out clearly. "Jews in Harlem are small tradesmen, rent collectors, real estate agents and pawn brokers; they operate in accordance with the American business tradition of exploiting Negroes, and they are therefore identified with oppression and are hated for it. I remember meeting no Negro in the years of growing up who would really trust a Jew, and few who did not, indeed, exhibit for them the blackest contempt."

Up until Watts, I had ignored these charges. Now I began taking seriously Baldwin's aphorism on the universality of the scapegoat: "Georgia has its Negroes and Harlem has its Jews."

I was resolved to return to my Negro lawyer friend and tell him off, to let him know that Negro anti-Semitism is a betrayal of the Jewish community and of our whole civil rights involvement. But before I did, I owed it to myself to do a little research on these charges of Jewish exploitation.

The Merchant and the Low-Income Consumer

With this in mind, I read a recent paper entitled "The Merchant and the Low-Income Consumer," delivered by the author, Prof. David Caplovitz, professor of sociology at the University of Chicago, at a meeting on Negro-Jewish relations convened by the Conference on Jewish Social Studies. His calm description of the consumer practices of the low-income marketing system and the exploitative features of the merchants sickened me. That most of the merchants in this low-income marketing system are Jews, and most of their customers Negroes, made Caplovitz' paper more relevant to my forthcoming meeting with the Negro attorney.

Here is described the "bait advertisement" whereby high-pressure salesmen manipulate the customer into buying expensive merchandise which he had never intended to buy; here is the account of the "switch sale" whereby artful salesmen convert cash customers into credit customers. Prof. Caplovitz discusses the utter "lack of shopping sophistication" and vulnerability of the Negro customer to buying on credit. . . . A Negro who has bought an item on credit and reduced his obligation to $280.00, loses his job and is summonsed for $440.00. He doesn't know what hit him. He doesn't know that he is liable to pay interest on his debt, that he is liable to pay court expenses and legal expenses. He may rush back to the merchant who sold him the item only to be told that his installment contract has been sold at a discount to a finance company. The merchant is thereby absolved of all personal responsibility and involvement. The Negro is left to deal with merciless collection agencies, summonses, garnished wages and lawyers . . ."

Caplovitz, whose research brought him to Harlem and to the Lower East Side of New York City, cites the case of a Negro who purchases a TV set, and who only learns that it was a reconditioned machine later, from the

repairman . . . A Negro woman buys a watch for $60.00 which is later appraised at $6.00. He describes the incredible high-mark-up system of items which are displayed without price tags. A $100.00 TV set sold at $300.00 is known in the trade as a "number two item."

Salesman and Merchant as Referral Agent and Counselor

Sure, the Negro is ignorant and gullible. He knows nothing about the Better Business Bureau, Legal Aid Societies, State Banking and Finance Departments. He is hungry for status, and the salesman assures him that in his store his credit is good for any purchase. In our object culture the Negro's proof of existence runs from the premise "I have something" to the conclusion "I am someone." Caplovitz further describes the Negroes' dependence upon the white merchant and salesman, whose worldly sophistication is a key to the world outside the ghetto. In an impersonal, bureaucratic society, the salesman and merchant becomes the Negroes' referral agent and counselor.

That most of merchants trading in these areas are Jews disheartens me. Nor do I find joy in reading in the *New York Times* of January 1963 the published lists of landlords who have accumulated over 50 health and safety violations on their buildings, especially when the preponderance of names are unmistakably Jewish. Nor do I like to hear the Negro resentful over those unions, many with Jewish officers in control, which exclude Negroes and Puerto Ricans.

I will not deny it. I do not relish the thought of meeting up with my Negro friend again. Our earlier encounter unsettled me. How will it go now? It is a new experience for me—and one for which I am not morally prepared. I know how to confront the traditional anti-Semite of the white establishment who bullies my people, who rants and rages his hate against us. To him I stand up as a victim of his groundless hate.

But this one—this Negro does not raise his voice, he cries as one more victimized than myself. This voice speaks for the ignorant and the illiterate, the weak, helpless, hopeless, cheated and deceived community.

This is the voice of Esau, he who discovered that Jacob had dressed himself in his skin and elicited the birthright from the blind Isaac. Esau, who came to Isaac, pleading "Bless me also, O my father." And when Isaac said, "I cannot bless you because your brother came to me in deceit and took from me the birthright," Esau bellowed "Have you not reserved one blessing for me?" And Esau lifted his voice unto the heavens. And Isaac blessed him with these words: "By the sword shall you live, and you shall serve your brother, but when you grow restive, you shall break his yoke from off your neck."

"Stealth of Mind" and "Oppression by Words"

I am not afraid of the hands of Esau, but I fear his voice. Because his cry, no matter how I may seek to dodge it, shames me and my people and the God of Israel. That cry is hurled against those who call themselves Jews and who rob the blind, setting a stumbling block before them. Those who exploit them do more damage to you and me, to your children and mine, to the name Jew, than a thousand

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Jewish freedom riders may ever hope to repair. Those who practice *"Genevat daat"* (stealth of mind), and *"Onaat d'varim"* (practicing oppression by words), desecrate the name of the God of Israel and the image of the Jew. That Negro trapped in the ghetto does not care what the rabbi preaches or what the Jewish organizations declare in formal resolution. That Negro knows us through those most *visible* to him: the salesman, merchant, creditor, landlord, with whom he deals daily in his quest for life.

It is no small irony to contemplate that the very same men who violate the ethics of our tradition and create such resentment and hate may be making generous contributions to Jewish defense agencies which seek to battle anti-Semitism.

Hold on now, Rabbi. Be fair now. *Hass kategor u'va sanegor v'yikah m'komo.* Let the prosecution halt, and let the defense be heard. I've heard it before.

"What do you know about business in this area of the community? Do you know the risks involved in dealing with the Negro? We did not create the ghetto, the racial problem, unemployment. But we must deal with him who is last hired and first fired. Who will give him credit but us? To own a property, to own a store, is to be constantly worried about robbery, abuse of property, non-payment, mugging, physical violence. Are we not entitled to some compensation for that risk? The Negro is a considerable risk and we can not change society overnight."

Maybe they're right. Maybe in our society "ignorance is no excuse," maybe *caveat emptor* is the way of this world, maybe "business is business." Maybe in our present society one cannot deal with the Negro in the ghetto without such hard practices.

The Alternative to Complicity with Evil

But if it is true, then there remains an alternative. There is always an alternative to complicity with evil. The alternative for the Jew is to get out. *GET OUT.* This is no way for a Jew to make a living. Exploitation of the weak and ignorant is no way for a Jew to make his profit. It may truly be that you and I cannot clean up the slums, or eliminate the ghetto—but we can at least say, "Our hands have not shed this blood." If we cannot demand of ourselves surrender of this kind of parasitic existence, what does Judaism amount to? If God cannot say "let go," what does it mean for a Jew to know God? Where else does *kiddush Hashem,* the sanctification of God's name, speak to us more clearly?

I could, of course, say to my black brother Esau, "Why now do you single out Jews? Negroes are exploited by white Protestants and Catholics, and by Negroes too. Why should you expect more of Jews?" But the words would stick in my throat. I can not say that, not only because I am proud that the Negro does expect more of Jews, but because we ourselves have a right to expect more of Jews. Have we so shriveled the image of our being that we are prepared to resort to the degenerate argument that would exonerate evil conduct because this is the way of the world, this is how all the others behave? Is this the outcome of centuries of martyrdom of a people covenanted to the sanctification of God's name, wedded to the principle

that ethical conduct between man and man is witness to God's reality?

My Child, My People and My God

I know some of you will argue that it makes no difference to an anti-Semite, white or colored, how we act. Some will insist that even if all Jews were to act in a manner beyond reproach, the Negro anti-Semite would hate us. But this is not the issue. I do not practice Judaism by looking over my shoulder to see how it will impress the other. I do not care what the Negro expects of me. I care what my child expects of me, what my people expect of me, what God expects of me.

The Negro anti-Semite may speak of ordinary envy or out of Christian prejudice internalized, but if he has objective grounds for resentment, am I to ignore his charges? I may not like the one who informs against my son, nor trust his motives, but, should the charges have objective validity, can I ignore them? Am I not compelled to speak to my child, to seek to correct his ways?

I could, further, protect myself by saying to my Negro friend, "This is not our responsibility. There are all kinds of Jews. You cannot blame the Jewish community for the guilt of some of its members." I can not say that to him, either. For *we are a responsible community. "Kol Yisrael arevin zeh bazeh"*—all Israel is co-responsible. *We are not all guilty*—but *we are all responsible.* And if I am wrong here, by what right do I say to the Germans, to those German ministers and priests who were not themselves guilty of Nazi crimes, that they violated their moral and religious responsibility in not raising their voice and not exercising their power against the guilty ones in their pews and parishes? Whom did they excommunicate, to whom did they deny communion?

We are here in the synagogue this very day to confess our sins together, sins which we clearly did not all commit; but our open, public confessional is grounded in acceptance of collective responsibility. As a religious people we pray and confess in the plural, and we seek our redemption and atonement in the plural.

A Conspiracy of Passivity

I speak these words to you this day because you and I are part of the Jewish community. I ask myself and you what we are doing, not outside our own Jewish community, but within it. I ask of the respectable members of the Jewish community who verbally support the cause of the Negro community, what are we doing with those discriminators and exploiters who deceive, who tax and take advantage of such people and frustrate them? I ask whether we are guilty of duplicity, of a conspiracy not so much of silence but of passivity. I ask whether there is in the synagogue an "Ethical Actions" Committee? Whether the Jewish Welfare Federation and Jewish Community Relations Committee and the Synagogue Council can organize itself so that, with evidence, it can confront those who desecrate the name of God in business practices and say to them: "We come to you in the name of the Jewish people, and in the name of the God of Israel we demand that you cease this exploitation." And, if he refuses to hear us, we are resolved to

use every ounce of moral pressure against him. He will not serve on our board, he will not be one of our officers or our lay leaders, he will not receive our honors or our *aliyot* or our *kibbudim*—we will not honor him—because by his ways he dishonors us, he shames our faith.

Such action may result in our losing contributions, but it will gain for us a new respect. Jew and non-Jew will know what it means to be a respected member of the Jewish community. Our children will know what it means to be a Jew.

A Midrash tells us that the Messiah will not come until the tears of Esau are dry. I pray with you: God of Abraham, make strong the heart of Israel, that with kindness the hands of Jacob may wipe away the tears of Esau. And Jacob shall be known as Israel—for he has wrestled with his conscience and he has prevailed.

THE BOOK OF JOB: THE GREAT DISSENT

STEVEN CAHN

THERE ARE CERTAIN WORKS of literature which have inspired such voluminous commentary that readers who approach such a work for the first time possess a preconceived notion of "what the author really meant." Such readers try to interpret what they read so as to bear out this preconceived interpretation. The Book of Job is just such a work of literature. There is a generally accepted interpretation of the Book which has been stated numerous times in various forms by representatives of both the Jewish and Christian traditions, and which has been stated once again in Marvin Pope's Introduction to the recently published and much-discussed *Anchor Bible* edition of Job.*

It may be that this traditional interpretation catches just the meaning intended by the unknown author or authors of the Book of Job. This we will never know. But it is interesting to note that almost all the statements of the traditional interpretation depend not at all on an investigation of the original sources of the Book and the nature of the manipulations and alterations of these sources previous to their incorporation into the Book, but rather on a supposedly objective reading of the text of the Book as it stands in its final form in the Bible.

In Conflict With the Traditional Interpretation

I should like to take issue with this traditional interpretation on its own grounds, i.e. on a simple reading of the biblical text. It may be, doubtful as it seems, that, by an appeal to such means as a detailed interpretation of certain fragments of ancient folklore, the traditional interpretation can be upheld. What I wish to show is that it is *only* by such an appeal that the traditional interpretation of the Book can be upheld, for an objective reading of the text, as it comes down to

* Doubleday and Co., New York, 1965.

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