

COLLEGE YOUTH AND THE FUTURE OF JUDAISM

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Recently, in an address before eight hundred delegates at the annual national convention of the Mizrahi Organization of America, Dr. Gershon Churgin, secretary of the Mizrahi national education committee, charged that Jewish college students in the United States were guilty of promoting a trend toward "Jewish cultural suicide." In fact, he declared that a cult of "know-nothingness in regard to the Jewish heritage is developing with alarming speed." Here is a tendency that he finds not only anomalous but appalling when it is viewed against the background "of a growing appreciation generally in our country of religious values and a growing quest for the enduring moral certainties to which an individual may attach himself in an age of atomic uncertainties."

In every age, the elders of the tribe raise their hands to heaven in horror at the defections and devilry of the young, but somehow Jewish culture survives the fierce assaults of the young iconoclasts of Israel who, once their fury of revolt is spent, cherish the wisdom and carry on the work of their forebears. Despite all their declaration of spiritual independence and their barbaric yawps

of sacrilege, Judaism manages to retain its meaningfulness and vitality. What the elders, in their alarm, fail to realize is that the young cannot be profitably chastened by denunciations, however righteous in motive, nor won over by dint of exhortations, however earnest and vehement in tone. Not for a moment do the young doubt the sincerity of their elders; indeed, they look to them for guidance, wisdom, and inspiring leadership in this age of crisis and catastrophe; but they are convinced—it is with them a methodological principle of inquiry—that the truth, which is never final, must be tested at all times in the crucible of experience. Hence they maintain that it is their inalienable right to question, to experiment with new ideas and new ways of thought, to challenge and, by challenging, test the enduring moral certainties to which they may attach themselves. Since they are determined to go ahead with their intellectual and spiritual quest, no one can stop them, but why should anyone make the attempt to stop them?

The battle over values and ultimate truth goes on all the time, in the home, in college, in the Hillel groups and Jewish organizations on the campus. When Jewish college students feel they have found a sympathetic and understanding ear, they will confess not only

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their doubts but also their anxieties, their moral conflicts, their burdensome sense of guilt. For they are not too happy over their benighted state of doubt. Despite their ritualistic gestures of defiance, they are not particularly glad to embrace a skepticism that leaves them with nothing but a series of sterile negations ;they do not willingly repudiate the faith and depart from the paths of their forefathers. Yet there are some aspects of orthodox religious practice they cannot conscientiously accept, and if this is proof positive of a trend toward Jewish cultural suicide, of a cult of know-nothingness, then the young are prepared to plead guilty, but they will not shrink from the consequences of their outlook, the logical implications of their insight. No matter what the charges leveled against them, they will follow the voice of reason and the truth that is confirmed by experience.

Many of the complaints sounded by the leaders of orthodox American Jewry are not, however, to be lightly set aside. The young, they feel, are reckless, if not irresponsible, in their rejection of the Jewish heritage. By means of sophisticated and superficial arguments they are prepared to discard the culture of their people, the spiritual faith of their folk, and play the old, dangerous game of assimilation. Seduced by alien but attractive ideas, they look upon themselves fundamentally not as Jews but Americans, native sons of the American tradition, an integral part of its soil and spirit. By rejecting Judaism they adopt a world outlook and are loyal not to a tribal but universal code of morality. Instead of devoting themselves to Zionist organizations or reading Hebrew literature in the original, they will give themselves unstintedly to the great cause

of human freedom, of which the finest example is the struggle for the full emancipation of the American Negro. The Jewish girl who has the courage to go out on a date with a Negro or marry a Negro—there is a heroine, a pioneer in the battle to affirm and implement the doctrine of human equality, a liberal who acts out her beliefs. They will study the philosophy of Karl Jaspers and Santayana, John Dewey and Carnap, not the philosophy of Mainonides; they will spout the ideas of Jean-Paul Sartre and Kierkegaard and Mounier and scorn the views of Jewish Existentialists like Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig; if they read poetry, it is the poetry of Shelley and Byron, T. S. Eliot, Auden, and Dylan Thomas.

The objection raised is not to their interest in secular Western philosophy or their admiration of the masterpieces of world literature. No modern Jewish educator has ever demanded that Jewish college youth confine themselves within a cultural ghetto. The objection is to the frank disvaluation of all things Jewish and to the exaltation of whatever is not Jewish. Any cultural contribution stamped with the label Jewish or Hebrew is immediately suspect. One Hebrew writer brought up his daughter to love the Jewish cultural heritage; she accompanied him on his trip to Palestine, and she studied Hebrew with enthusiasm. When she enrolled in Brandeis University, he hoped that the congenial intellectual atmosphere there would stimulate her interest in Judaism and deepen her love for all things Jewish. Unfortunately, the daughter now insists on rejecting all that the father believes in. Though he has published a number of excellent works in Hebrew,

What is the remedy? What is the emotionally disturbed father to do?

He cannot win her back by angry rebukes. He must be patient, with the patience born of wise understanding. There is no need for alarm. It takes a long time for the young to grow up and profit from their ongoing experiences. Youth is traditionally the age of storm and stress, the period of skepticism and revolt. When these young men and women in college come of age, they will settle down as Jews to a life of communal responsibility, eager, like their fathers before them, to preserve and perpetuate the spiritual treasury and cultural wealth of their people.

The future of the Jewish community in the United States depends essentially on how the younger generation of Jews interpret their role as Jews and as Americans. This is especially true of the intellectual elite who will become the leaders of tomorrow. How conscientiously will they bear the burden of social responsibility? For what goals will they strive and what kind of life will they form for themselves? What loyalties will they cherish, what ideals will they pursue, what example will they set their children? In short, we come up, in the last analysis, against the crucial question as to the character structure and spiritual commitments of the young. What are they really thinking, these difficult days, about religion, Judaism, moral values? Through what crises are they passing, and what fateful decisions are they being forced to make?

No reliable statistics are available on the subject of faith or godlessness among Jewish college youth. Yet the young do speak out and are eager to discuss their problem. They seem to be seriously concerned about the matter of their spiri-

tual allegiance. The first disturbing problem they confront is that of self-identity. Over and over again the Jewish student asks himself the question, Who am I? What am I? Pulled in different directions by competing spiritual forces in his culture, he is beset by doubts of all kinds, but his most distressing doubt relates to his status and identity as a Jew. What is a Jew? What does being a Jew mean? Belonging to a specific race or nation? Participating in a definite culture? Adhering to a particular religious denomination? No single definition is sufficiently comprehensive and exact to embrace the Jewish essence, and yet the Jew remains somehow a Jew, and the Jewish student is unhappy without the intellectual support that a definition seems to give. At this stage of his development, he is nothing if not rational in his outlook and evaluation of things. Everything in his world must be consistently logical, bound together by links of cause and effect, and he approaches this baffling problem of his Jewishness in the same strictly logical spirit. Hence he cannot accept categories of Jewishness that transcend the naturalistic level. He cannot agree with Will Herberg that the only valid interpretation of Jewish existence is that which views it through the perspective furnished by the biblical-rabbinic faith.

With the exception of a minority who argue that they are Jews by virtue of their religious faith, the great majority of Jewish students are unable to solve this painful problem of their identity. If they question the existence of God, they often seem to suffer from a haunting sense of guilt, as if this constituted a betrayal of their Jewishness. Those who no longer believe in the efficacy of

prayer or attend services regularly at the synagogue, assume that religion is a meaningless formalism. In place of the religious orthodoxy they have cast off, they espouse a secular "religion" of humanitarianism. Ardently they preach the unity of mankind, the need for equality of treatment for all people, the elimination of racial discrimination. Even as they enlist in this crusade for freedom and equality, they dwell with their parents in a predominantly Jewish neighborhood; their friends at college are largely if not exclusively Jewish; the fraternities or sororities to which they belong are composed chiefly of Jewish students.

All this complicates terribly their problem of belonging. In college their social needs are taken care of by a rich variety of extracurricular activities. But as they look into the future, they are troubled. To what cause shall they give themselves wholeheartedly? Zionism? Politics? Social reform? Liberalism? Shall they marry and settle down and devote themselves single-mindedly to promoting the welfare of their immediate family? What of their relation to the Jewish community, in the United States and throughout the world? What about the question of religious training for their children? Various and conflicting are the answers they give to these questions. The only issue on which they are all strongly united is that of anti-Semitism. On this subject, whenever it arises, the Jewish student betrays his degree of emotional identification with Jews throughout the world.

Though they are frequently not orthodox in their religious beliefs, they still identify themselves with the Jewish people. What troubles them keenly is that they cannot formulate the reasons

for this feeling of identification. Why does it exist, on the basis of what principle of solidarity, what community of interests and ideals? Some find a creative outlet for their energy by joining a socially active and articulate group like Hillel, but the vast majority of Jewish students on the campus do not attend the lectures and forums that the Hillel group organizes, even when well-known and inspiring speakers are on the program. Why this studied aloofness? Does it spring from a rooted disinclination to proclaim and accept themselves as Jews?

Fundamentally, all these emotional disturbances and disaffections grow out of the effort on the part of the Jewish student to define his identity. He is trying hard, in his own way, to find a satisfying answer to the question: What does it mean to be a Jew in the modern world? Must he associate exclusively with Jews because of a biological accident of birth or because he may not be hospitably received by Gentile fraternal groups? Is anti-Semitism the sole force capable of uniting young Jews on a course of action? Should he remain first and foremost an American and a Jew only at home, or should he publicly declare his Jewishness and stand forth as an aggressive non-assimilationist? Either solution is beset with difficulties, and the college youth of our day turn to their elders for light and leadership. All of them, though in different ways, are striving to develop a body of values and beliefs which will enable them to relate themselves to Jewish and American culture and to function fruitfully and harmoniously both as Jews and as Americans.

There is no need for alarm. Those who are emotionally upset by the alleged immorality or irresponsibility

of the young are making a bad mistake—a mistake born of poor judgment and lack of faith. It is evident they have little confidence in the spiritual conscientiousness, the intellectual seriousness, the moral earnestness and good will of the younger generation of Jews in college. Anyone who has talked intimately with them or listened intently to their debates and discussions or tried to answer some of their searching questions, knows that in the end they will certainly come through. If their attitude at the present time does not conform in all particulars to the religious ideal that the elders hold up, that is to be expected. It is a good thing for the young, a sign of intellectual health on their part, that it is so. For that matter, the elders of Israel do not agree among themselves as to what is admirable or what God demands of man and how a “good” Jew should carry out his duties, secular and religious, on earth.

The ideological sky will not seem so overcast nor the clouds so menacingly dark if it is borne in mind that the young, in this age of universal military service and threatened atomic warfare, are passing through a critical stage of intellectual inquiry. Everything—all

pieties, all established truths, all certitudes—is to be subjected to the test of reason and experience. While in college, they are encouraged to question all things. Whatever commitments they finally make should be based on free choice rooted in full knowledge and growing out of a strong personal conviction. If in the end they decide to throw in their lot with Jewry—and that, despite all their pronouncements of disbelief, their heart has already decided for them—their faith will be passionate and wholehearted, not lukewarm and wavering. They may not subscribe to all the articles of the orthodox creed or carry out all the religious practices of their forebears, but they will remain true to the underlying spirit of Judaism, the spirit which binds such men as Einstein, Freud and Erich Fromm to the Jewish tradition and the Jewish people. Though the young in college feel a deep sense of solidarity with their own people, it is, in large part, a solidarity forged in the fires of suffering, cemented by the experience of homelessness and anti-Semitic persecution; driven home by the psychology of alienation. It is not a religious bond and it cannot be that in the old sense.