



A STORY OF TWO LOVES: CREATING JEWISH LEADERSHIP AND JEWISH COMMUNITY

Address by
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HERBERT R. ABELES MEMORIAL ADDRESS

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The Herbert R. Abeles Memorial Address was established in 1961 in memory of Mr. Abeles, who was President of the Council of Jewish Federations from 1955 through 1959 and died the following year. Conceived as a continuing tribute to his memory and his broad social aspirations, the Address is given each year at the Council's General Assembly on a subject "of fundamental concern to the Jewish community organizations of the United States and Canada."

A STORY OF TWO LOVES: Building Jewish Leadership and Jewish Community

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If one sees large numbers of Jews before him, the Talmudic Sages taught (*Ber. 58a*), he should recite a blessing: "Blessed is He who in His wisdom discerns secrets." What are these "secrets"? The Talmud explains: no two Jews look alike and no two think alike. It is a divine "secret" how such fiercely independent individuals can pull together as one people.

I am moved to recite the same blessing, *Barukh Hakham ha-Razim*, as I address this distinguished gathering this evening—some two thousand or more Jews and Jewesses who neither look alike nor share identical opinions, and yet labor together, in unison, for the welfare of our people. That certainly deserves a blessing!

My theme this evening is both general and specific. I shall try to trace some of our current problems to a conceptual dichotomy that has been latent for centuries. I shall seek, thereby, to identify two constants that are prerequisite for Jewish leadership and for a viable Jewish community as we move into the closing decades of this century.

In his *The Great Chain of Being*, a pioneering work on the history of ideas published almost 50 years ago, Prof. Arthur O. Lovejoy showed how two ideas conjoined in the philosophy of Plato lived side by side peacefully for about two millennia, only to come into violent conflict with each other as their implications were spelled out over the generations. Even in the realm of ideas, friends can become foes. Compatible ideas can break out into open opposition, and apparently differing concepts can later merge into one.

I detect a similar process taking place in the thought and experience of the Jewish people. Two great precepts that lived harmoniously with each other have now become sharpened into two antagonistic forces that threaten to rip apart the fabric of our people. Only a deliberate and conscious effort on the part of Jewish leaders and opinion-molders to establish peace between these ideas—to embrace both of them harmoniously—can restore the wholeness of the House of Israel in our time.

Ahavat Yisrael and Ahavat Ha-Torah

These two ideas are: *ahavat Yisrael*, the love of Israel, the feeling of profound kinship with all Jews everywhere, the sense of identity and sympathy with all Jews whatever

their disposition; and *ahavat ha-Torah*, the love of Torah, the esteem for learning the divine Word, the immersion in Jewish law and lore, the appreciation and pursuit of Jewish education.

These two principles of love of Israel and love of Torah appear to be thoroughly compatible, indeed complementary to each other. What can be more natural than the love of one's people and the love of that which gives it its meaning, its mission, its culture, its way, its distinctiveness?

Yet, early on there began a testing of these two ideas against each other—only in a theoretical way, of course, and without any clear awareness that this opposition could have real and even disastrous consequences.

Clearly, these two are foundations of Jewish existence and experience. They represent the body and soul of our people, its physical identity and metaphysical dimension. Yet, which is more important? Which must give way before the other? We have here a classical *mahloket rishonim*, a disagreement between two of our most eminent authorities.

The spokesman for one opinion is the Egyptian-born giant of Jewish law and philosophy, the tenth century Babylonian Saadia Gaon, who wrote that "our people is a people only by virtue of the Torah." Our peoplehood is meaningless without the Torah which gives us purpose and direction, and hence the love of Torah is clearly superior to the love of Israel.

The opposing point of view is advocated by the immortal poet-philosopher of twelfth century Spain, Yehudah Halevi, who taught that the special qualities of Israel existed before the giving of the Torah; that we are not Jews because of the Torah but rather the Torah was given to us

because we are Jews. The matter is put beautifully in an anonymous Midrash, *Tanna de'vei Eliyahu*, composed some time between the third and ninth centuries. The author meets a semi-literate man who says, "Rabbi, there are two things in the world which I love with all my heart, and they are Torah and Israel, but I do not know which comes first." The Rabbi responds, "My son, most people think that Torah comes first, but I tell you that Israel comes first" (Chap. 14).

I know of no real consequences of this difference of opinion between Saadia and Halevi in the Middle Ages. At the beginning of the modern period, we do begin to notice a practical turn to this controversy. There emerge certain movements which are Israel-centered rather than Torah-centered—Zionism, Auto-Emancipation, and the like. Others base everything on Torah, on religion, and relegate Israel or Jewish peoplehood to second rank: it is more important that Torah prevail, even if in the process large numbers of Jews have to be written off. Yet even then the split between the two was not catastrophic. Even the most extreme nationalistic Jews were immersed in Jewish culture and learning to some degree, and the most separatist Jews lived in Jewish communities where they were linked with all other Jews.

It is in our days and our times that this bifurcation of the two loves becomes downright sinister and a threat to our survival. Gentle preferences tend to become exclusive choices—with tragic consequences.

The Dangers of Exclusivity

To concentrate solely on our physical survival with no thought to our cultural and religious tradition or, conversely, to focus our loyalties exclusively on our spiritual legacy even if it means alienating vast numbers of Jews

who may be indifferent to it—this is the primal sin of our times. Jews without Judaism, Judaism without Jews—either one is treason, because each of these is a prescription for the end of the story of both Israel and Torah.

More than that: each is self-defeating and counter-productive in its own terms. The preoccupation with Torah and Jewish learning to the point where we ignore or distance those many Jews who do not subscribe to it—this can only result in a narrowing of the circle so that before long there is only a tiny remnant of loyalists left, too few to regenerate a whole people, too few to carry on the Torah tradition. Such love of Torah without love of Israel results in no Torah as well as in no Israel. Saadia never intended this.

Similarly, the exclusive concern with Jews as a people—with the State of Israel, with anti-defamation, with Jewish charities, with Jewish self-defense, with the Jewish poor and aged and sick and underprivileged—all this, with no care and no concern for the legacy of learning and culture and Jewishness, is a tested formula for national cataclysm. In an open, democratic, pluralistic society, Jews have to know *why* they should be Jewish, and without Jewish learning they will never know the answer. And if they have no answer they will stop being Jewish, and the Jewish people will cease to be. H.G. Wells was right when he said that the future is a race between education and catastrophe. Love of Israel without love of Torah therefore results in neither Torah nor Israel. Halevi would have been aghast at this.

If we yield on either principle—Israel or Torah, Jewish welfare or Jewish education—we are doomed. Despite the inevitable tensions between them in ordering the priorities on the agenda of North American and world Jewry, we must avoid their total contradiction. The Jewish community must be rebuilt on both these foundations. The contest between Saadia and Halevi must be declared a draw: both are right and both are wrong, because Jewish

leadership—and this distinguished assembly represents nothing if not Jewish leadership—stands under the sacred imperative to advance both great loves, to embrace both historic concerns, to abandon neither one.

It is immoral to neglect the human needs of Jews, or to use the love of Torah as an excuse for functionally regarding whole parts of the Jewish people as out of the fold. It is blasphemous to ignore and denigrate and alienate Jews in the name of the Torah. To criticize Jews, to reprimand them, to upbraid them—that is legitimate if it is done in love and compassion. That was the way of the Prophets. But to do so without love, without friendship, without making every effort to achieve Jewish unity, that is by no means the way of Torah. After what we Jews have been through, we dare not give the impression of lightly excluding whole segments of the Jewish people from the fraternity of the House of Israel. I have many reasons for saying that. Millions of reasons. Six million reasons.

However, this is hardly the kind of audience that has to be reminded of its obligations to the Jewish people, whether in North America or Israel or the Soviet Union or Ethiopia or anyplace else in the world. You are wise enough and benevolent enough to seek to heal rifts and work for unity and not react with rancor to statements that displease you and positions that may appear offensive. Wisdom usually thrives best in an atmosphere of calm deliberation. I know you will not color your rhetoric purple.

But really, it is not necessary for me to preach to the converted. The majority of the Jewish people of our time, and especially its leadership, needs to be reminded of the other half of the story, the other principle that is in danger of being forgotten.

Will Our Leaders Be Jewish Enough?

Your President last night reported to you the happy news that you have made substantial gains in your annual

campaign, and that you can expect spectacular increases in your endowment funds—more than \$1 billion of endowment in this decade! All this is a tribute to your effectiveness as fund-raisers. Your leadership here is uncontested. But I wish to re-echo a question he asked that is not only important but fateful: “Will our leaders be Jewish enough?” To me, that is the question of questions.

What you have achieved so far is a glorious testament to your love of Israel, to your sense of American voluntarism, to your human capacity for compassion for the needy. I have no doubt that in the process of exercising communal leadership you have had to put up with much criticism, some of it patently unfair, with much anguish, with considerable sacrifice, and with a degree of insomnia. (Incidentally, it has always been thus. When the immortal Rabbi Akiva was approached to become the *parnas* of the community—the equivalent of today's president of Federation—he said that he would have to consult his wife and family. When he did, the Jerusalem Talmud reports, someone in the family was overheard saying to him: Take it—on condition that you know in advance that some will curse you, some will humiliate you [*Pe'ah* 8:6].) But it is all worth it, because you have succeeded magnificently in providing for the State of Israel, for Soviet immigrants, for the poor and the aged and the young and the widowed and the orphans and the sick.

But the question that should gnaw at our vitals, that we must expose relentlessly to our own consciousness and conscience, is this: does all this have a future? Will all this be a record of past accomplishments without continuity? This General Assembly is the fiftieth such of the Council of Jewish Federations. Half a century from now will our grandchildren be assembling to celebrate the centenary of this Council or its successor, and carry on the business of advancing the cause of a thriving Jewish community; or

will we become the moribund subject of dry scholarly papers by historians debating how and why this once great community came to an end?

A Community in Crisis

You know it as well as I do. We are a community in crisis—internal chaos and disarray, beset by problems of identity and survival. The implications of the Emancipation are still being played out, and we have not yet begun to emerge from the trauma of the Holocaust. The figures for mixed marriages are horrendous, and no amount of preposterous self-delusion about marrying out adding strength to our ranks can make the ugly fact go away. The number of our children receiving any kind of Jewish education is depressingly low. Indeed, the number of children, with or without Jewish education, is depressingly low. Assimilation continues unabated.

Now, I do not mean to despair. Jews do not despair. But I am genuinely frightened. It is not too late. But it is very late. It is time to turn, with a new sense of urgency, to the spiritual legacy, the Jewish culture, the tradition of learning and heritage of wisdom, that alone can stem the tide and assure us of a future. For the first 50 years of Council's existence as an organized community of Jewish communities we have proven our *ahavat Yisrael*, our love of Jews. Now, if we really love Jews and want to see them escape the threat of extinction, we must reenforce our *ahavat ha-Torah*—the love and devotion to Jewish learning and living, the transmission of Jewish teaching and tradition.

By "love of learning" I mean not only the geriatric concern that so many of our grandparents shared—that study of Torah is for the old or retired folks; not only the pediatric preoccupation that was pressed by so many of our predecessors—give it to the kids to prepare them for

Bar or Bat Mitzvah; not even, as so many of us have finally come to accept, and I shall return to this presently, the philanthropic commitment of the community to Jewish education. I intend, in addition, a deeply personal, life-long commitment to Jewish learning—*our* learning, *our* study of Jewish texts and courses, *our* Jewishness, *our* Jewish education, *our* intelligent awareness of what being a Jew is all about. The Jewish condition can abide skeptics. Non-believers too can be Jewish lay leaders. But what is unthinkable is *am ha'aratzut*, ignorance of Jewishness by those who purport to lead Jews.

Just as you cannot ask for money until you yourself have given—a cardinal rule of communal leadership—so you cannot effectively plead and work for a more Jewishly-informed community until you yourself have exposed yourself to Jewish learning. You cannot be a general unless you are a soldier, you cannot be a leader unless you are a participant.

Becoming Jewishly Knowledgeable

Besides, why *should* you deny yourself the pleasure of being Jewishly knowledgeable? Why forego the exquisite delight of a new insight into a passage in Exodus, of mastering a Rashi, of understanding a Mishnah? Why forfeit the thrill and excitement of analyzing a simple text of Talmud, whether in the original Aramaic or in English translation, of appreciating the towering genius of a Maimonides? Why not be selfish and let the sheer wonder of Yehudah Halevi's poetry, even in English, move your heart as you share his longings and his loves? Why not try to decipher the symbolic meaning of a Midrash, its parables and legends and interpretations? Why not follow the twists and turns of Jewish history as this tiny, often pained, but always magnificently different people winds its way through the corridors of time? All that is required

is intelligence, with which you are abundantly blessed, a little time, and some ingenuity. Notice that I am not pleading for a faith-commitment.* That will come or it will not come. I am speaking of Jewish literacy and knowledge-ability.

Our own study of Torah will not only challenge us intellectually and spiritually; it will also do more for us as *community leaders*. It will invest all our activities with new significance. It will impart to us a sense of *mitzvah*, of mission and ennoblement and contentment, as we go about our otherwise mundane business of allocating and administering, of deciding on budgets and personnel, on agency turf and on campaign progress, on visits to Congressmen for Israel and on absorbing new immigrants.

It will provide for us a scale of values, reminding us that each human being entrusted to us is unique, as unique as the "image of God" in which he or she was created; that tending to the sick and lonely is more than just social ethics, it is the "Way of God" who clothed Adam and Eve, healed Abraham, buried Moses; that the State of Israel is not just another politico-ethnic national entity that happens to be Jewish, but is a state built on the land of *our* fathers and mothers, a land that longs for us, its children,

*Indeed, one may ask: What of the love for God which plays such a significant role in Jewish religious thought? A seminal Hasidic thinker of the last century, R. Zadok Hakohen of Lublin (in his *Tzidkat ha-Tzaddik*, 196) has written of three loves: of God, Torah, and Israel. The latter two, which are "revealed," stem from the first which is "concealed." By this he means to say that the pursuits of knowledge ("love of Torah") and human fraternity ("love of Israel") fundamentally derive from religious faith, even if it be unconscious. Passages in the Talmud speak of the study of Torah, even in a "secular" manner, ultimately leading back to religious affirmation. Elsewhere in Jewish literature we find similar statements about human love leading back to love of God. In an age of such religious diversity in the Jewish community, therefore, it seems to me more fruitful to concentrate on the two derivative loves, of Israel and Torah, as the conscious foundations of the Jewish community, and allow the element of religious faith to remain "concealed" both as a matter of confidence and prudence.

and whose prophets and seers wanted it to become a center of peace and justice and instruction for all peoples; that how we exercise our leadership in the 1980's is not an evanescent concern of an ephemeral community but part of an overarching history and a crucial act in the drama of the covenant between the Creator and this people called Israel; that we are not Jews just because we are not non-Jews or because so much of the world is against us, but because through our veins there courses the blood of prophets and philosophers, of Sages and jurists and poets, of God-seekers and teachers of human fellowship, because we carry and pass on to our children the genes and chromosomes of Abraham and Moses, of Hillel and Akiva, of Rashi and Maimonides; that not only great historical decisions are of importance, but also how we deal with wife and husband and parents and children, how we comport ourselves with friends, how we go about the daily business of living, even what we think in the depths of our hearts when no one is looking and no one is listening and there is no one in front of whom to posture and pose.

All of us are in search of something transcendent, something nobler, something exalting, to touch our lives, grab us, uplift us, fill the emptiness within us with new meaning and new insight. Well, that is what the study of Torah was meant to achieve, in any language and form. It really is, as Proverbs teaches, a "tree of life for all who take hold of it and it gives happiness to whose who support it."

Communal Obligations

But I return to our communal obligations as leaders. If indeed there can be no Jewish people without Jewish learning, then the future development of *Jewish* leaders and a *Jewish* community demands of us a resolute effort of unprecedented proportions to inculcate and implement

the teaching of Torah on all levels, from primary grades through higher education, in all groups, and as widely as possible. I know that Federations across the country have made remarkable progress in appreciating the significance of Jewish education. The last two decades have seen an astonishing change of attitude—a tribute to Federation's openness to changing conditions and perceptions and its willingness to learn. But meanwhile conditions have worsened and yesterday's dosage of medicine is inadequate for today's disease. Half measures and tokens will not—will no longer—do.

Franz Grillparzer, the Austrian playwright and poet of the early part of the last century, wrote of the Hapsburgs,

*It is the curse of our proud dynasty
To move half-heartedly, to stop half-way,
To adopt half measures hesitantly.*

The Hapsburgs fell because of their half-heartedness. We will prevail only if we pursue our goals with "all our heart and all our soul and all our might." Our communities will survive these dark days only if our young people are given much more intensive Jewish education, formal and informal. Federations must consult anew on how to solve the problem of underpaid and undertrained teachers, and tuition too high for young families. They will have to be carefully selective in differentiating between Sunday School tokenism and real education. They will have to encourage innovation and shun faddism. They will have to demand performance from Jewish schools. They will have to appreciate that the real decisions as to whether or not to remain Jewish are made by young people of high school and college age, and therefore turn their attention to *higher* Jewish education. At the schools I head some of our very best and most Jewishly-dedicated students, young men and women motivated to serve the community, are those who came to us at age eighteen, on their

own, searching for something more intensively and authentically Jewish.

The resolve not to allow the learning of Torah to be eclipsed will require of us special courage and even heroism, especially in these trying days when the Federal government has reduced its own subsidies and passed on its responsibilities to the private sector, while at the same time enacting tax laws that make life more difficult for philanthropy. Your tasks are exceedingly difficult. But real leadership, authentic Jewish leadership, must not flinch before hard decisions. We will be confronted by instances of communal triage: who gets the vital dollar and who does not? It will test our values, our principles, our ideals, our priorities. Many good causes will have to suffer so that better or more important causes can survive.

One More Generation May Be Too Late

But remember this: One more generation without massive help to Jewish education—one more *half*-generation—and it may be too late. And if that happens, no amount of hand-wringing and breast-beating and finger-pointing will restore vitality and viability to the fatally sick body wilting of malnutrition of the Jewish mind and heart.

I know—your tasks are unenviable. Decision-making in such an environment is grueling. It will win you enemies. It may well disturb your peace of mind. But I recommend to you the closing sentence in *The Tragic Sense of Life* by the Spanish philosopher, Miguel de Unamuno: “May God deny you peace but give you glory.”

The trade-off is worth it. Peace of mind and freedom from criticism are a small price to pay for the prize of glory—the glory of preserving and enhancing for Jews throughout the world their most precious possession, the world’s most priceless heritage; the glory of resolving the

contradiction between two fundamental principles that nurtured our people from the beginning of our history, and of embracing once again, equally, both our sublime loves: of Israel and of Torah.

The clock of history is ticking away. Choices must be made. We shall have to decide between different courses. We can allow the aging of the North American Jewish community to continue on its path as before, while we routinely tend to its concerns as best we can but effectively allowing the process of disintegration of a once great Jewish community to be played out until its bitter and sorry end. Or we can take a new turn, tap within ourselves heretofore unsuspected resources of human spirit and Jewish creativity, and transform this affluent but threatened and diffident Jewish community into one of the most vigorous, constructive, and promising in all of the history of the Diaspora. And of course, what happens to American Jewry will profoundly affect the destiny of the State of Israel.

Let me conclude with the metaphor of the clock by telling you a Hasidic story.

When the great Hasidic "rebbe" known as the Seer of Lublin died, one of his sons came from some distance to claim his share of the inheritance. He took his father's *bekesha* (rabbinic cloak) and his clock that chimed the hour. On his way home, he stopped at an inn. He had to stay there for several days longer than he had planned because of heavy rains. As a result, he did not have enough money to pay the innkeeper, and so left him the clock in lieu of payment for his lodgings.

Many years later, a famous rabbi travelled and stopped at the same inn and noticed the clock. "Where did you get it?" he asked the innkeeper. The innkeeper told him of the rebbe's son and why he left it there. The rabbi told the inn-

keeper that he recognized the clock as having belonged to the Seer of Lublin.

"How did you recognize it?" asked the innkeeper.

The rabbi replied: "Every other clock, when it strikes the hour, has its own peculiar and characteristic message. The chime calls out, 'one hour closer to death.' But the clock of the Seer of Lublin has a message different from any other clock in the world. Its chime sings out, 'one hour closer to Redemption.'"

Inspired by the two great loves, of Israel and of Torah, in concert with each other, and fortified with the high resolve to commit our time and intelligence and strength and resources unhesitatingly and whole-heartedly to the tasks before us, *this* Jewish leadership will lead *our* Jewish communities not one hour closer to decay and demise, but one hour closer to triumph and redemption.



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