

CONFESSIONS OF A CONFUSED RABBI

Two weeks ago, the last time I spoke from this pulpit, my theme was ecology -- a not unimportant issue in contemporary life. However, that was the Shabbat after the Cambodian invasion and the Kent killings. Some days after that Saturday, some of our younger men met with me and expressed criticism -- not of my sermon, but of my choice of topic. They voiced their sentiments with admirable delicacy and consummate derekh eretz. The gist of their remarks was, "Rabbi, how could you? We were just waiting for a ringing talk on the great issues of the week."

In a sense, I admit that this particular form of criticism was welcome, since it offset the sometimes disgruntled reactions that come from my occasional foray into public issues.

Now, in good faith, I must say that before and during and after that particular sermon, I worried about my choice of a subject. And today I still do not know if I was right in what I did and what I did not do. Indeed, I beg your indulgence for turning personal this morning, for taking you into my confidence and sharing my dilemmas with you. I do so in the conviction that my individual problem is just one special case of a larger situation that faces most of us in many areas of life, that moral ambiguity and the difficulty of making a decision without clear guidelines is part of the existential predicament of man, especially in these complex times in which we live.

My "confession" will, I hope, be an honest one. We read in to-

day's Sidra, *lilke hile eile yuh le*, "you shall not deceive one another." The great Hasidic teacher, Rabbi Yitzchak of Vorke, asked: we know that a Hasid always goes beyond the law, he observes not only the din, but also lifnim mi-shurat ha-din. How can a Hasid observe this law of "thou shalt not deceive thy brother" in such a manner? And he answered: *ix3x hile eile yuh le*, "do not deceive yourself..." So today I want to come clean with myself too in public, not deceiving myself, even if it means that I may conclude with more problems than solutions, with more questions than answers, with more dilemmas than clarifications. I do so out of a sense of confidence in the maturity of my congregation, that they acknowledge together with me that it is better to confess to honest confusion than to pretend to non-existent clarity.

The confusion to which I confess concerns, in the first instance, the larger problem of the role of religion in public life, and the involvement of teachers of religion in issues that might be fairly characterized as political. How does a Rabbi decide what is proper or improper for discussion from the pulpit? Where does one draw the line between politics and morality?

Of the two extremes, I am convinced and I have no confusion: it is wrong to politicize the pulpit, and it is wrong to be irrelevant.

I rule out politicization of the pulpit. The Torah concerns more than politics, more than the issues which we consider major. It has a perspective that overarches our own immediate, parochial, temporal

concerns. A sermon must not sound like a digest of the editorial page of the New York Times with appropriate passages from the Sidra of the week attached thereto. The pulpit must not be turned into a platform. And Rabbis, like other professionals, must be wary of what has been called "the fallacy of inferred authority," the error of blithely assuming that because a man has attained a degree of proficiency in one area of life, that he may speak with authority on any other subject.

Equally unthinkable is the alternative of irrelevance. There are issues in which the moral element is outstanding, or where Judaism has a clear position, or where Jewish interests are deeply involved. At such times a Rabbi cannot afford to remain silent, lest he prove the irrelevance of what he has to teach. Furthermore, one need not fear that even on these issues Rabbis will act with a kind of pontifical claim to infallibility. Unlike some religions, Judaism does not have a Rabbi speak on public issues as if they were subject to a psak halakhah. He does not pronounce on political problems ex cathedra, as if members who do not accept his opinion are liable to excommunication.

But if I am clear about ruling out the extremes, what of the gray areas, where moral ambiguity reigns, where there is no clearly definable Jewish position, where contrary opinions are thinkable? Most public issues are of this nature. Indeed, politics, as the study of the interaction of people, is ubiquitous; and certainly Torah is concerned with this realm of life. Does the Rabbi always keep silent on such matters because they may be dubbed political? Then he is indeed irrelevant and

what he has to say is not "real." Does he always talk out? Then he becomes too controversial, too political, and he jeopardizes the acceptance of his genuinely and purely spiritual and non-social or non-political message by his people. Does he sometimes speak out and sometimes not? If so, where does one draw the line? I do not know. I confess that I am confused.

Such is the problem in its broadest outlines. But there are also individual sources of perplexity. Indo-China is one example. I am not by nature or conviction a hawk, and so I was deeply distressed by the Cambodian invasion, as I was again upset this morning when I learned that American airplanes will continue to bomb Cambodia even after our troops have left. For the record, let me say that in the past I have spoken out against the Vietnam involvement of the United States, though this -- unlike other clergymen -- has not been my only concern for the past several years.

I should like to restate my position as briefly as I can: I am opposed to the Vietnam war, and by extension, to the Cambodian invasion, not only because of the destruction of the Vietnamese and the havoc wrought upon that corner of the world, but because of the havoc that is wrought upon the United States by this war.

The author of the " *וְיִשְׁמְרוּ* " once made the following comment about a famous verse of this morning's Sidra, one which happens to be inscribed on Liberty Bell: *וְיִשְׁמְרוּ* *בְּכָל* *אֶרֶץ* *יִשְׂרָאֵל*
"and ye shall proclaim liberty throughout the land unto all the inhabi-

tants thereof." Should it not say *may be*, you shall proclaim liberty to all the slaves? Is it not the slaves rather than "the inhabitants" who are being liberated?

The answer is that when the slaves are liberated, the masses are emancipated as well. No man, even the master of slaves, can appreciate freedom until it is given to every man, including his slaves. Freedom is indivisible -- either all enjoy it, or none know it. Slavery is as reprehensible, as debilitating, as deadly to the master as it is to the slave. For both of them, it means the crippling of human relationship, a paralysis of the ability of one human being to open up fully to another human being.

In the same manner, the war and the bombing and the defoliation that our men and equipment are visiting on Vietnam are as dreadful to the United States as they are to the Asians. They have ripped apart the fibre of our country, taught our men to kill and to murder, caused social unrest and the greatest danger yet to this great country.

And despite this -- and I confess that I may have been wrong because I am still confused -- I chose not to speak about Cambodia from the pulpit and to denounce the American move. I suppose that I would have satisfied the overwhelming majority of my congregation had I done so. But I felt that the issue was too sudden and too complex for simplistic and impulsive reactions. I did not feel that weighty issues such as diplomacy and military security should or could be solved by righteous indignation alone. Of course, I also know that not knowing

enough about a situation can be used as an excuse for inaction and moral paralysis. After all, if we must know everything about something before we speak out and act on it, then, since it is almost impossible to know "enough" about anything, we have a ready-made excuse for doing nothing. That is a practically safe but morally dangerous approach. But here I felt that the subtleties were such that a critical situation of this nature could not be pronounced upon without further thought.

Permit me to confound the problem further by introducing another element that we simply cannot avoid, that we must not sweep under the rug: the Jewish interest.

Clearly, Jews should not be parochial and ignore universal, broader issues. Nor should we imagine that every single issue in life must be related to "the Jewish problem." There are many issues in which the Jewish interest is completely peripheral, and which can be studied and acted upon objectively. But equally clearly, it is only a sick and self-hating Jew who will ignore the major interest of his own people and concern himself exclusively with others. I have nothing but contempt for the so-called "universal" Jew who makes every people's concern his own, save that of his own people. And pathological Jewish anti-Semitism is no more palatable when it comes from Jews of the New Left than when it comes from a Jewish born American Nazi.

Our attitude ought to be: enlightened self-interest -- both elements: self-interest and enlightenment. This philosophy has already been enunciated by Hillel:

[illegible]

האם לא, 2388 -- "If I am not for myself, who will be?" Hence, I must have self-interest. "But if I am only for myself, who am I?" what contribution can I make to the world-at-large? Hence, I must be enlightened.

Thus, we must weigh carefully whether a Jewish expression, as Jews, would result in endangering the position of Israel which faces such a terribly critical situation in the Middle East today -- and, who knows, perhaps endangering the position of Jews in American life.

I am not now saying that the Cambodian situation is or is not related to the Israeli situation, nor am I saying that this relationship is strong enough to have caused us to keep silent even if we felt compelled to talk out. But certainly we must consider it. Certainly we have no right merely to dismiss offhand the interests of kelal Yisrael.

The same policy of enlightened Jewish self-interest motivated the Rabbis of The Jewish Center, together with other Rabbis of this City, to write to members of the Congregation to support certain candidates of the Community School Board who presented themselves to us and who we knew would carefully protect the interests of Jewish teachers and students in public schools and Jewish education generally, while at the same time working indefatigably for the public weal of the entire community.

One member of this congregation has objected to this letter. In the interest of fairness, and because Rabbis do not presume infallibility, we respect his dissent and his right to make his views known.

But, upon reconsidering, we do not change our minds. Hillel's dictum

holds. We are convinced that we have acted wisely and correctly. For one thing, I am not confused about is the duty of the Rabbi to care for the interests of Jews and Judaism and Jewish education, and act to the best of his ability.

Let me finally turn to another major argument pressed upon a Rabbi from all sides today, and urged upon me by the young men whom I mentioned at the beginning of this talk. If I will not pronounce on Cambodia, I was told, I will alienate our youth who are waiting to hear such matters discussed from the pulpit.

I accept this argument on the face of it. But allow me to pose a counter-question: what if I do discuss these issues, and do not agree with the campus enthusiasts? Would I then not certainly alienate them? The question would then resolve itself into how to play to the galleries: to alienate the Establishment adults or the activist young? Do they cancel each other out? Do I weigh which is more influential, and which is more expendable? Should this be considered at all? Will young people, or any people, be attracted or repelled by such a lapse of integrity, by such shameless pulpit flattery?

Aristotle, in his Nichomachean Ethics, wrote, "though both (Plato and truth) are dear to me, it is my sacred duty to put truth first." I say the same: though all three -- the young and the old and truth -- are dear to me, my sacred duty is to give precedence to truth.

Quite frankly, I am impressed with the depths of student involvement for peace and justice. I have ungrudging admiration for the total -

ity of their idealism and zeal. They are far superior to and more promising than the previous generation, the one that matured after World War II, and whose only real interests were job security, good pay, and a house in the suburbs.

But I have certain reservations, and honesty prevents me from flattering our youth in the hope of winning souls for the Lord by suppressing valid and legitimate criticism.

First, I do not accept student opinion as authoritative merely because it is expressed with a great deal of zeal or enthusiasm or passion. So for that matter -- and I speak as a member of a faculty -- do I feel that I must automatically accept an opinion uttered by a man with the title "Professor" before his name. I am willing to listen to everyone, but I feel compelled to accept no opinion as authoritative merely because its author has either ~~passion~~ or title.

Second, I agree that the outrageous Kent and Jackson killings of students were tragedies and scandalous, a blot on the history of our nation. I agree that these events deserve the two days the public schools were shut in sympathy and in protest. But I vigorously oppose those universities which canceled the rest of the term, and those which called off final examinations, which dispensed with conventional grades and prefer the "P-F" system because of the Kent and Cambodia events. I cannot conceive of how either situation will be improved by students falling down on their studies and taking life easy. I have been a student for too many years myself not to recognize that there

is in this not only a selfless wish to brood in silence for the rest of the term, but also the quite normal human student desire to get out of a tough final~~s~~ exam situation if he possibly can.

We read this morning: חלוקה לשלש חלקים יחד הם

פרק 810, "You shall not deceive one another, and you shall fear the Lord." What is the relation between these two halves of the verse?

One great Jew answered: You must not deceive each other even in yirat shamayim, piety. It is possible to misuse piety and distort it for personal ends. The same thing holds true for the secular version of yirat shamayim -- idealism and enthusiasm and zeal. I fear these have been misused and abused for personal interests in the current issue.

So, faculties throughout the country have failed their students and schools and their most fundamental academic commitments by diluting academic standards. What else can be said of such schools as UCLA which have decided to give course credit for "off-campus political work?!" And militant students who demand their right for dissent while denying it to other students, while refusing to allow old and revered professors to go to classes and laboratories, are a disgrace and are guilty of misusing pious intentions.

Third, I question the priorities and consistency of many Jewish students when they make of the Black Panthers a great cause celebre of their moralistic movement. Yes, I agree that they are, in this country, entitled to a fair trial and to be protected from police brutality and vindictiveness. I believe we should see to it that the police who

were brutal are punished, and that even Black Panthers receive their rights as American citizens. But they are not our friends! They are anti-Semites and they are anti-Israel. I would like to see young Jews who seek justice for the Black Panthers -- and more power to them in their passion for justice -- oppose these pernicious anti-Semites with equal zeal. I would like to see the concern of young American Jewish campus activists for the schoolchildren who were killed yesterday by Arab guerillas in Northern Israel near the Lebanese border. I am waiting to find out how many days or even only hours will be called off school to protest what the Arabs have done. Maybe a little protest of that kind will put an end to the diseased mentality of those Jewish extremist youths who flirt with El Fatah.

And yet despite these reservations, I know that the restlessness of youth can be and often is a blessing. I know that their assertiveness will make it difficult for any American administration in the future to force the destinies of this country in any direction without consulting the citizenry and its elected representatives first. They will make it impossible for any university administration to act autocratically and paternalistically, deciding the fate of students whom they expect to act maturely and will not give the credit of asking their leave as to what direction their studies and their institution will take. For this they deserve our thanks and our gratitude.

But I am back to my confusions which I have not yet dispelled. To what extent do we or do we not attempt to win the loyalty of youth in situations where we may or may not agree with them? Where do we

draw the line at Jewish interest combining with or sometimes clashing with other moral concerns? And, in this desperate, crisis-ridden age, when people do look to religious teachers not for decisions but for guidance, how does one steer a middle course between politicization and irrelevance? Where do we draw the line? I confess: I am confused.

I leave you at least with this suggestion of certain guidelines that I have developed for myself. I commend them to each of you in your own situations: one must exercise reason and intelligence; search our sacred tradition for hints as to action; be of good will; act in enlightened self-interest; have faith that if we have chosen wisely events will vindicate us; keep an openness to change and a willingness to accept criticism and advice; pray that you do the right thing; and hope that eventually the confusion will evaporate like a cloud in the sunlight.

Meanwhile I apologize if I have confused you more than enlightened you. The consolation I leave you with is this: that chaos always precedes creation, that tohu va-vohu had to be present before there could be yetzirah.

So I hope that if we confront our confusion properly, and with the right attitude, that ultimately we will be blessed with creative clarity.