

“THE JEWS AND THE ECUMENICAL COUNCIL”

HOW OUGHT JEWS REACT?

an address by

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By now everyone knows of the efforts of the Catholic Church to rectify certain ancient wrongs it has perpetrated against the Jewish people. The Ecumenical Council, called to discuss various internal problems in Christianity, was presented with a proposal concerning the Jews. In the *schema* on Christian unity, Chapter 4 urged that the Church retract the old charge of deicide of which Christians had accused Jews for ages. It asked that the Jews be absolved of guilt for killing the central figure of the Christian religion. This proposal, as we also know, was not voted upon; it may possibly be brought up for consideration again next September.

My purpose this morning is not to speak about the Catholic action as such, but rather about the reactions of certain Jews, perhaps very many of them. And it is concerning these reactions, which in many cases are quite disturbing, and in some cases outrageous and scandalous, that I wish to register a complaint, and to offer several suggestions.

The complaint is that we have *over-reacted*, occasionally to the point of compromising our principles and our dignity. And my suggestions are that we be cautious; that we exercise our critical faculties; that we not be overwhelmed by the torrents of publicity; that we strive for a historical perspective; and, above all, that we judge men and events not by the shifting standards and ephemeral moods of the moment, but by authentic Jewish criteria — the eternal values of Torah and Tradition.

We Jews are a grateful people. The very name "Jew" implies gratitude: it comes from "Judah," and that name — in Hebrew, *Yehudah* — was given to her son by Leah because "this time shall I thank the Lord" (Gen. 29:35). It is this element of gratefulness that has made Jews so loyal, throughout these many years of our dispersion, to those countries which have offered us safety and freedom. It accounts as well for the many lasting contributions we have made to the science and the literature, the finances and the security, of benevolent regimes.

Yet, what is essentially a virtue can, under specific conditions, become a vice. The noble quality of thankfulness can be pushed to an extreme which is undesirable. We Jews have often suffered from this over-gratitude. For instance, Russian *maskillim* were so grateful to the Czarist regime for the liberal measures it enacted concerning the Jews in the 1860's that a wave of assimilation and inter-marriage ensued. It took less than ten years for them to discover how bitterly wrong they were: in 1871 the same government conspired with criminal elements to foment the infamous Odessa Pogrom. Some of our own American assimilationist Jews are no better. Out of gratitude to our wonderful country, they have imagined that one must become a 1000% American, and that "Americanism" requires abandoning all religion and culture that is not of the majority at the moment. So the Jewish heritage was considered "un-American," and the over-gratitude became utterly destructive.

We are noticing a similar phenomenon in the popular Jewish reaction to the Ecumenical Council. The reactions are, by and large, unreasoned, unbalanced, excessively emotional, wishful, and extravagantly grateful. Individually many of us experienced an outpouring of deep emotion to the Churchmen gathered in Rome.

Jewish organizations, especially those dedicated to harmonious intergroup relations and anti-defamation as the greatest good in the universe, kept their mimeograph machines working overtime. The spirit of euphoria gripped many a seasoned Jewish spokesman, spilled over into the excerpts of sermons printed in the press, and was reflected in the writings of various Jewish columnists. One Reform Rabbi in Florida marched his congregation into a neighboring church; the proposed absolving of Jews from the guilt of deicide was evidently considered the trumpet-call signalling the end of all our old religions and getting together in one communion. The head of all Reform Temples solemnly informed a convention that the spirit of ecumenicism works both ways and that therefore we Jews must reciprocate by accepting the central figure of Christianity as "a positive and prophetic spirit in the stream of Jewish tradition." This same individual declared, in utter abandon, that "the mind is staggered and the heart enkindled simply by the prospects of the implications" of this proposed statement by the Council. To such an extent were minds paralyzed and hearts thrown into black confusion. And all of this — for a brief statement, the exact text of which has never been made public, and — irony of ironies! — which was never accepted even in principle!

So, in this mood of elation and gratitude, certain so-called Jewish leaders (in a demonstration of *galuth*-psychology that would never have been tolerated in the 2000-year history of the Jewish *galuth*) were prepared to bow low and offer for the taking all the treasures and sanctities of Judaism, in return for — nothing! Any kind of bartering or bargaining with religious principles is vulgar and degrading; how much more so a poor deal such as this.

But for those to whom these words are addressed it is unnecessary to berate such blasphemous people who have the temerity to call themselves "rabbis." It is more important to consider them as the extreme manifestations of an underlying current that prevails throughout the Jewish community, and to analyze that current.

The question is: ought we feel grateful to the Roman Catholic Church for the sentiments allegedly expressed in this Chapter 4 if it would have passed, or if it will later be voted upon favorably (and, despite all the assurances in the press, it is not at all that certain)?

My answer is: *No!* Despite the fact that there are without question many sincere and genuine liberals amongst the Council members, the answer must be a categorical "No." We Jews will not owe the Church even one iota of gratitude, even if it finally does declare us innocent of the charge of god-killing.

First, there is the elementary rational principle that if someone strikes me and harasses me and persecutes me without reason, and then desists, I owe him no debt of thanks for stopping. On the contrary, he owes me an apology for abusing me unjustly. Only a subservient, obsequious, negative personality who has no self-respect will *thank* his tormentor for calling off his playful tortures.

With a few luminous exceptions, the record of the Church towards Jews is dark and dismal; read Malcolm Hayes' *Europe and the Jews* and you will learn the history of the Christian practice of anti-Semitism and their persecution of our people throughout the ages into the twentieth century, including contemporary

Argentina. If the Church will now remove the religious sanction of anti-Semitism and withdraw the cruel, despicable charge of deicide — an accusation which would be a joke if it were not so tragic in its consequences — we will owe it nothing. No thanks are due to a religious communion which has decided as late as 1963 to civilize its theology — and even this attempt has failed! The Jew who is overcome with gratitude at this present occasion is the kind who, when confronted with anti-Semitism, imagines that there must be something wrong with Jewishness that it should incur such hatred.

This brings us to a second point. Christian anti-Semitism is not a Jewish problem; it is a Christian problem. Jews may be interested observers — but only from the outside. We have no right to interfere in the conversations of Christians, to suggest, to request, or to offer gratuitous advice. The charge of deicide — a barbaric, savage, atavistic relic of primitive paganism — is a blot on the conscience of Christianity. It does not present any moral problem for the innocent victim. Religious anti-Semitism, the charge of deicide — these are a scandal to Christianity. If they will be removed by the Church, it will be cleansing its own soul, not ours.

A third point should be emphasized: we may perhaps have overrated Christian theology, and especially the accusation of deicide, as a source of anti-Semitism. This malignant condition, we now know, has many causes, and none of them alone can explain all of it. Once, liberals thought that anti-Semitism was the result of ignorance alone. But in that case how does one account for German anti-Semitism, or the more refined kind that often infects the academic community? Poverty has been blamed for the hatred of the Jew. It may explain many instances; but how does it account for the anti-Semitism of the "country-club set?" So can Christianity alone not be blamed exclusively, for then how could we explain the anti-Semitism of avowed atheists, of anti-Christians such as Nazis and Communists?

We ought not to forget the powerful insight of our Rabbis who declared that the Hebrew word for hatred, *sinah*, sounds much like *Sinai*: when the Torah was given to Israel at *Sinai*, that is when *sinah* towards the Jew came to the world. Put into modern terms, that would mean that when a Christian hates a Jew it is not really because he believes he *killed* his god; it is rather, on an unconscious level, that he cannot forgive him for having given *birth* to his god! The moral code of Judaism, which came to the world through Christianity, tried to control the unbridled passions of the pagan soul, and it is the irritation with this discipline and civilization which is manifested as anti-Semitism. So that even if the deicide accusation is officially rescinded, it will not bring the millennium of inter-religious harmony and good will.

There is yet another reason for hesitating before embarking upon an unlimited expression of gratitude. Let us remember that when the Catholic Church was at its most powerful, when it wielded much greater influence over the minds and destinies of men, it never even considered reducing the charge of deicide against what then were known as the "perfidious Jews." Today the Church is no longer as all-powerful as it once was. It is being undermined by the growing secu-

larism in the Western world and by the official atheism of the Communist countries, and its expansion into Africa and Asia has been checked by the end of colonialism, the means by which the white man's faith was traditionally imposed upon the pagan natives. In our time, the main threat to Jewish survival is no longer, as it once was, the Church. The real dangers are, rather, assimilation, the anti-Jewishness of the Communist countries, and the string of Arab states that encircle the State of Israel. It is only now, late in the day, that the Catholic Church has begun to rouse itself — and even then, *it has turned around and gone back to sleep until next September!*

A final point must be made. There is a supercilious religious note to the reported statement. As Jews, we must object to being “absolved” of the guilt of killing their god. To be “absolved” implies that one is guilty, but nevertheless he is being forgiven. But we Jews never were guilty, and we do not therefore beg forgiveness.

As Jews, we object to the whole focus of discussion being whether or not we are guilty. For to our mind the question is not: who will absolve *the Jews*? The question is: who will absolve *the Church* for its guilt in inspiring and sponsoring crusades and inquisitions, blood-libels and pogroms? The question is not: who is guilty for killing one Jew some 2,000 years ago; but who is guilty for allowing thousands upon thousands of Jews to be killed throughout the last 2,000 years?

This chapter in the *schema* — not yet adopted — is a beginning; that is true. But — even if it will be adopted — it is *only* a beginning. Repentance (*teshuvah*), according to Jewish teaching, requires not only resolution for future proper conduct (*kabbalah*), but also, indispensably, confession (*vidui*). And the Church has expressed to the Jewish people neither apologies nor confessions nor regrets. Germany has done so; individuals do so when they offend a neighbor; nations do so in the course of international conduct. But the Christian churches have not done so, and the Catholic Church does not do so now. There has been no sign that the Church is willing to concede that it has done wrong, even when such wrongs have been forcefully brought to public attention.

These words are not all said in an anti-Catholic spirit. On the contrary, I have often maintained that it is time we American Jews dropped our almost traditional anti-Catholic bias. Today all religions must work together against the common enemy, that all-pervasive secularism which threatens us all alike. Catholics and Jews can enjoy mutual benefits in cooperating in matters of public policy on many important issues. What has been said is, rather, an attempt to assert Jewish pride and dignity.

We Jews make no claim to being intrinsically, ethnically, better than any other people. But neither are we any worse. And we must therefore not suffer from feelings of inferiority in the confrontation with other faiths. When Judah approached Joseph, whom he did not recognize as his own brother, the Torah writes, *va-yiggash elav yehudah*. And the *Baal ha-Turim* remarks that the last letters of these three words spell *shaveh* — “equal.” You may be a powerful Egyptian potentate, Judah hinted to Joseph, but I am your equal. That must be