

"DIALOGUES OVERDONE"

It is my considered and solemn expectation that when the historian of the future writes the story of American Jewry, he will record, correctly, that the major influences on the religious character of the community were exerted not by scholars or rabbis, not by theologians or academicians or heads of Yeshivot, but -- by the New York Times.

I wish I could be only semi-serious about that statement; I am not. It is unfortunately true that the masses of our people, in their profound ignorance, are far more affected by the headlines in our prestigious press than by the real issues and their consequences.

It is because of two such page-one articles that I wish to discuss this morning a problem with which I have not dealt at length for about two years: the dialogue between Judaism and Christianity.

Last week, the front pages told us that dialogue was entering into a new stage, in which Jews and Christians were preparing for theological conversations. The second headline, two days ago, informed us that certain Madrid Jews had participated in services with Spanish Catholics in a Catholic church.

Briefly, it is important for every Jew, and especially every member of this congregation, to know that the first report is misleading and the second unfortunate.

The first is misleading, because there is no change at all contemplated in our policy. Those who have favored theological dialogue in the past have practiced it without waiting for the consent of the press; and those who are opposed to it -- and this includes mainly the Orthodox group and, through it, the Synagogue Council of America -- will not do so now or in the future. There is no change in our position.

The second report, concerning Madrid, is regrettable. It is unfortunate that the only way to signal even a slight improvement in tolerance for Spanish Jewry is to invite us to worship in a Catholic church, instead of in the more humane and meaningful move of permitting Jews to pray in their own synagogues without molestation and restrictions.

Permit me to restate briefly the point of view of traditional Judaism on dialogues, a position patterned on the formulation of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik.

Dialogue is not just polite inter-faith conversation or scholarly colloquia about comparative religion. Both of these have not been lacking in the past. We do not have to have high pressured public relations men of American Jewish organizations to teach us how to be civil and cordial to non-Jews, nor do scholars need such assistance in order to exchange their scholarly findings.

Dialogue is an encounter of the most intimate and cherished commitments a person possesses, a total engagement of two personalities, a no-holds-barred confrontation in which everything is risked

and no results are preordained, and from which the partners rarely emerge unchanged. It is in this context and with this definition that our position should be understood.

Orthodox Jews differentiate between the social-cultural aspects of dialogue, and the purely theological. We approve and encourage social and cultural dialogue. We believe it is important for religious people of all faiths to discuss the problems that agitate the mind and heart of the world and of this country, issues such as: civil rights, the war on poverty, the problems of war and peace throughout the world. However, we exclude theological dialogue, conversations on problems such as: the nature of God, revelation, Messiah, and salvation. It is true that sometimes there are borderline cases in which it is difficult to differentiate between these two areas; but gray areas exist in every distinction that the human mind can devise, and nevertheless distinctions remain valuable tools.

Why do we not assent to theological dialogue? Let me enumerate, briefly, five reasons.

Our first reason is the nature of religion itself. It is an intensely private matter, for my ultimate commitments and my faith reflect my deepest view of God, man, and world. My religious commitment is therefore a deeply intimate one. Especially when we speak of the historical religions of the Western world, my faith and the faith of the whole community issues from certain unique histor-

ical experiences, and I express those experiences in the form of a special religious idiom. Especially, therefore, because my faith is not just a collection of abstract ideas which I can exchange intellectually with someone else, but the expression of singular experiences, this faith cannot be the proper subject for negotiation or encounter in dialogue.

Second, dialogue requires that the two partners share their major and fundamental assumptions, and they clash on certain details. However, I deny that Judaism and Christianity share sufficient fundamental presuppositions to make dialogue meaningful. Furthermore, dialogue requires that both partners have approximately equal interest in each other. Theological dialogue between Jews and Christians, however, suffers from the deficiency of disparity. By that I mean, that Christians have much more legitimate interest in Judaism than Jews have in Christianity. This must be so, for Judaism is the cradle from which Christianity grew; our faith is one of the sources of the Christian communion. It is therefore important for Christians to know more about Judaism in order to understand themselves. However, Christianity makes absolutely no difference to Judaism. Our faith today is essentially the same as our faith in the days of Moses. Our Torah, our Halakhah, our theology is completely unaffected by the rise of Christianity, and the latter is therefore utterly irrelevant to Judaism. Dialogue under such conditions, therefore, is too imbalanced and unequal to make sense.

Third, I fear that theological dialogue invariably and inevitably will lead to a new Jewish-Christian syncretism, a hodge-podge of ideas and rituals which will be neither Jewish nor Christian, and which will prove offensive to both faiths. This intermingling of religious ideas and practices is assimilation at its most dangerous level. Maimonides, in the last third of his Guide, taught us that the purpose of most of the commandments of the Torah was to prevent this cultic borrowing from other faiths: be'hukotehem lo telekhu.

That theological dialogue usually leads to syncretism, such as mixed worship services, is not some irrational fear that Orthodox Jews have conjured up in hysteria. Last November, an official of the American Jewish Committee, under his own byline in the New York World Journal Tribune, reported that in Valymero, California, Benedictine monks and rabbis gathered in the Mojave Desert beside St. Andrews Priory at dawn and prayed together from the Book of Psalms. The Benedictines read their breviary in Latin, and the rabbis, dressed in prayer shawls and phylacteries, chanted their prayers in Hebrew. One wonders -- and I believe the sarcasm is justified -- how regularly the same rabbis attend daily services in their own temples and join their fellow Jews in a minyan in order to "daven." At least the misguided Jewish cantor in Madrid felt that his joining a Chatholic service was a way of gaining privileges for his synagogue; even this cannot be said of the distasteful activ-

ities sponsored by the American Jewish Committee.

A fourth reason is that, even respecting the good will and integrity of many churchmen who maintain that they do not possess conversionist intentions towards us, we simply cannot discount the habit of centuries. Some Protestants are open in their statement that to them dialogue is meaningless if they cannot use it to attempt to convert the Jew. Others, generally Catholics, are more subtle. The evangelical motive is there, although it is not admitted openly. Jews have no choice but to fear that their spiritual integrity is threatened if they engage in dialogue with the Catholic Church, which has appointed as its highest representative in the field of Jewish-Catholic relations in America a man who is a meshumad, a converted Jew whose sole desire is that his former co-religionists emulate his spiritual adventure.

Fifth, even were dialogue otherwise possible, I do not believe it is possible for it to take place in the same century which witnessed an Auschwitz and a Buchenwald, and which was accompanied by the silence of the churches which rang loud and clear.

Christianity may not be exclusively responsible for anti-Semitism, but its moral pretenses demanded that it speak out when six million Jews were being killed. It did not -- and therefore it should not speak to us now of dialogue. The disgracefully weak statement of the Vatican Council is not only not a spur, but a positive obstacle to any theological conversation. It has been pointed

out that at no time has the Vatican evinced the least trace of contrition for its covert complicity in Europe's criminal past. It is true that many morally sensitive churchmen feel an uneasy guilt about the past. But it is not our task to offer theological therapy for the residual guilt feelings of Christians.

The Vatican's tepid attitude towards anti-Semitism -- in which it "deplores" but does not "condemn" the crucifixion charge; its failure to refer to "deicide"; its inner struggle as whether or not to invite us openly to embrace the faith of Catholicism -- these do not allow self-respecting Jews to react affirmatively to its invitation for "fraternal dialogue."

The entire episode of the Vatican Ecumenical Council tells us that Pope John was an aberration; that the church of Paul is largely that of Pius dressed up to suit the fashions of the sixties; that the Pope of the Open Windows was a historical accident sandwiched between the Deputy Pope and the one who covets the reputation of the Missionary Pope.

So be it. With a church of this sort we can co-exist, we can even join in mutual efforts to better the lot of humanity in all the social and cultural and political problems that beset us. But we can have no truck with a theology with which we share no major assumptions, which is responsible for some of our most terrible tragedies, and which still does not acknowledge its role in the most treacherous crime in the annals of mankind. The past is too fresh in our memories.

Only yesterday, one of the leading murderers of European Jewry was captured in Brazil. Now is the time for us to live together, peacefully, but in silence. No words can bridge the abyss -- not in our time.

To Christians we ought to say -- if you want to express your humanity to us, do not speak to us of your truth, your dogmas, your religion which has brought us so much grief. Leave us be, in silence to regain the strength drained from us, and to rebuild -- both in the Diaspora and in Israel -- the physical and spiritual wreckage of our times.

Do not ever again hate us. And do not love us so much that you cannot bear to deny us your spiritual treasures and to share with us the "good news" of your salvation. Just leave us be as human beings whom you respect solely because we are human, acknowledging our right to be what we are.

We ask only respect, not love which seeks to give us that which we do not want.

No dialogues! Just make sure that there will no longer be any monologues of morbid hatred.

We are all of us, Jews and Christians, still reeling from the cruel impact of the past. We are each of us too shaken, too disoriented, to talk to each other meaningfully about the fundamental assumptions of our existence.

Now is the time that each of us must look into his own



collective soul, and each in his own unique way begin groping for a more genuine dialogue with God Himself, to Whom each of us are responsible, and Who sometimes seems to have abandoned all of us. Any other dialogue is just a distraction.

And to our fellow Jews we should say: as modern Orthodox Jews who do not wish to separate themselves from the rest of the community; who believe in mutual respect amongst all Jews, and not in acrimonious recrimination; as Orthodox Jews who want to and do extend the hand of friendship and fraternity to our fellow-Jews, we insist that here we draw the line. Jews who pursue theological dialogue to the point of worshiping at strange altars, will find themselves no longer at home in our sanctuaries. Jews who submit to the ecumenical embrace of others will find our hand of friendship withdrawn. We regard such conduct as a betrayal of Judaism. We deny your right to represent us or traditional Judaism. We see in such activity a revelation of your own inner un-Jewishness.

We are aghast at how dialogues have been overdone, at the manner in which supposedly responsible Jewish organizations have permitted over-zealous public relations men to substitute their vulgar professional exhibitionism for the considered judgment of the Sages of Israel.

All the reasons we have mentioned are really implicit in the first: the privacy of the faith-commitment. Each religion speaks to God in a very special and inimitable way, and it is wrong, dreadfully

wrong, to dilute this uniqueness through theological dialogue.

Our Sidra this morning begins with the report of va-yakhel, telling of how Moses assembled the Children of Israel and gave them the law of the Sabbath. The Zohar asks: why was it necessary to have va-yakhel before giving the laws of Shabbat? And why was the Shabbat given at all in this Sidra, when it was just mentioned in last week's portion?

The Zohar answers that when the law of the Sabbath was first given to the Children of Israel, the erev ray, the non-Jews who had accompanied Israel out of Egypt, protested. They themselves were unwilling to become full Jews, and yet they resented the idea of the Sabbath because Shabbat symbolizes, above all else, the exclusive relationship of God and Israel. Concerning the Sabbath we read, beini u-vein benei Yisrael ote hi le'olam, it is an eternal symbol between Me and between the Children of Israel. Every Sabbath in our prayers when we speak of Shabbat we say: ve'lo netato... le'goyei ha-aratzot, Thou hast not given it to the other nations. The erev ray therefore complained that Judaism was overly exclusive and ought to engage non-Jews in its deliberations and practices. They convinced many of the Israelites to go along with them. It became stylish to feel that all Israel ought to go ecumenical and participate in dialogues. No wonder that when Moses ascended the mountain, the people built a golden calf. The Israelites who wanted to shake off the unique and exclusive aspects of Judaism forced Aaron to go

along in the building of the golden calf. Va-yakhel ha-am al Aharon, the people caused Aaron to assemble all Jews: it was an assembly of ecumenicism, a great joined dialogue in which everything was to be mixed together. The golden calf was ideal: everyone could join in it, no one was excluded, it was truly in the spirit of democracy.

Of course, that episode represented the lowest point to which Israel had sunk in its history. And after the consequences of this idolatry were uprooted, Moses approached his people and va-yakhel Mosheh et kol adat benei Yisrael, he too assembled the people; he, like Aaron, va-yakhel -- he assembled the people -- but only "the congregation of the Children of Israel." And he confirmed to them the principle of Shabbat: that every religion is entitled to its own relationship with God, without inter-faith interference; and that Israel too has its own special and cherished relationship with the Almighty.

About this idea and ideal of va-yakhel let all our people gather and draw strength from each other to confront the Master of the world. Today is a time not for Aaron's va-yakhel, but for Moses' va-yakhel; not for a golden-calf-ecumenicism, but for a Jewish Sabbath-exclusiveness, one which speaks about the Uniqueness of our religion without denying other religions their right to their own integrity.

That teaching is no less true and relevant today than it was then.

Our historic and traditional faith is now endangered by those who have been enchanted by the momentary gains of theological dialogue.

Our call goes out to them to return and to join us in our va-yakhel, and in the great tasks that await our generation in rebuilding and reviving and renewing Israel and its ancient covenant with God.

Only so will Israel remain true to its obligations to all the rest of mankind.