

JEWISH YOUTH IS NOT WHAT IT USED TO BE

Jewish youth is not what it used to be.

When I was a youngster, religious Jews usually preferred to make themselves inconspicuous. Jewish youth today, by and large, present themselves as what they are, no more and no less.

When I was a youngster, committed Jews were often apologetic about their Jewishness. Today, they are proud and assertive.

A generation or two ago, most middle-class and upper middle-class Jews, even if they were positive about their Jewishness, were rather embarrassed by fellow Jews who looked too Jewish, who were dressed in immigrant or Hasidic garb. One of the better pieces by Philip Roth, "Eli the Fanatic," described just that situation of a meshulah who wandered into Westchester, to cause chagrin and embarrassment for all the Jews who were ashamed to be identified with him. Today, most young Jews have no such "hang-ups," and they are Jewish without embarrassment or apprehension.

In general, a new spirit seems to prevail amongst committed Jewish youth of today that distinguishes them from their predecessors. They are forward, open, even aggressive.

It is in this connection that I draw your attention to the story of Abraham in today's Sidra. After he returns from a battle against an alliance of chieftains, which he undertakes in order to save his nephew Lot, who had been taken captive with the other people of Sodom, he is greeted by Malkizedek with a gift of bread and wine. Why bread and wine? My grandfather, אב"ד, offers an interpretation which is very much to the point.

When Abraham heard that his kinsman Lot had been taken captive, he did not become super-pious and fatalistic, declaring that it is all God's will and that it is not for him to interfere in the divine design. Instead, he girded for action and undertook it. He did not look for an excuse for doing nothing, considering himself as a man of the spirit and above such material matters. Rather, he armed himself, raised troops, and undertook a difficult military campaign.

But consider how shocked his peers must have been. How they must have shaken their heads in disbelief, and clucked their tongues at the change of "image" by Abraham! Here was a man who was an old patriarch, the teacher of monotheism, a great spiritual leader and man of lovingkindness, who suddenly girds his loins, raises a sword, and shows himself a soldier like all soldiers. Those pagan warlords of old must have gathered together in a kind of mini-United Nations, and condemned his campaign as a piece of racism. Is not Abraham, after all, a racist rather than an idealist when he undertakes to do battle merely in order to save his kinsman? Would it not have been more in place for him to teach matters of the spirit, as he used to, instead of resorting to war and armaments? Abraham has certainly changed! He is no longer the same Abraham.

I can even imagine that there must have been amongst them at least one warlord who was the prototype of the Syrian delegate who fouled the airways of the United Nations yesterday, and besmirched the already polluted air of this

city, when he delivered himself of a piece of unparalleled hypocrisy when he declared his respect for Judaism as a moral code applying to the relations between man and his Creator, but condemned Zionism as nothing but racist colonialism. So those contemporaries of Abraham, the spiritual if not biological ancestors of today's Third World, in all likelihood thought that Abraham had changed, that he was no longer a man of God, that he had become an imperialist and war-monger.

Thus we read ויצא מלך שדום לקראתו ... אז צמק השוה
Abraham was greeted in the Valley of Shaveh. But the word שוה also has a specific meaning in Hebrew, namely, "equal" or "uniform" or "the same." The ancient chieftains now considered that Abraham had become the same as they! Both then and now, when they criticized Abraham, it was not for being less than they were, but that he had become just as materialistic as they are. When we hear all those sordid accusations against Israel and the United Nations nowadays, we may be sure that what is meant is that Israel is being charged with being as base -- or "normal" -- as its critics. And then too, Abraham was criticized for coming down to their level, for being שוה, the same as they.

It is for this reason that we read ומלכיצדק מלך שזם הוציא לחם ויין,
that Malkizedek greeted Abraham with bread and wine. Bread and wine, my grandfather maintains, are symbols.

In order to understand this symbolism, let us turn to the Halakhah. In the laws relating to blessings, the ברכות תהרין, the principle is that there is a hierarchy of blessings, depending upon the food. Ordinary water, for instance, takes the blessing שהכל נהיה בדברו, whereas a vegetable takes בורא פרי האדמה, which is a higher level. Higher than that is בורא פרי העץ, etc. If, however, a food is changed from its natural form into some other form, it always goes down a level in its blessing. Thus, for instance, apples require the blessing בורא פרי העץ; but if one makes applesauce out of apples, and it loses the physical form of apples, one makes the blessing שהכל נהיה בדברו.

There are two exceptions to this rule. These are, wheat and grain. If one makes bread out of wheat, the blessing goes up, and not down: one recites המוציא לחם מן הארץ, which is the highest blessing for any solid food. And when one makes wine out of grapes, the blessing does not go downwards, from שהכל נהיה בדברו to בורא פרי העץ, but upwards to בורא פרי הגפן, the highest blessing over any liquid.

Why is this so? Because in these two cases of bread and wine, the change is considered נשתנו למעלותא, they have changed for the better. Change yes, but a change to the better, not to the worse.

That is what Malkizedek wanted to teach the nations of the world when they wondered at the change that had overcome Abraham. Yes, he meant to tell them, Abraham has changed. But it is the change that is symbolized by bread and wine. It is נשתנו למעלותא. Abraham has changed for the better. The same ideals, the same spirit, the same dedication, the same goodness-- but now he has revealed the ability to take action in order to advance his cause, the ability to implement his ideals, the talent to fight for what he knows is right.

It is in this sense that I am pleased that Jewish youth is not what it used to be. It is, to a large extent, more militant and outgoing, but not any less Jewish than its counterpart a generation or two ago. Like bread and wine,

it has changed for the better. Unquestionably, this is due to a large extent to the influence of the State of Israel, which is, after all, part of the beneficent heritage of the founding of the State.

Thus it is, that when I was a youngster, religious people would feel uncomfortable about reading a Hebrew Sefer or a Hebrew or Yiddish newspaper on the train or in public. Today, youngsters have no such qualms, and do not feel queasy about it.

A generation or two ago, religious Jews accepted the alienation of the Jewish establishment and large Jewish organizations as a fact of communal life. They made no effort to arouse the establishment organizations to an awareness of their existence. Today, young, committed Jews make their voices heard and demand that our great charitable institutions be responsive to the needs of Jewish education and the Jewish poor.

When we were young Jews, we were satisfied to practice our Judaism by ourselves, and felt no particular responsibility to other Jews who were not observant. Today's young religious Jews have a sense of outgoing obligation, a feeling of duty towards other Jews who have not been exposed to Judaism, and by the medium of Shabbatonim and Seminars they participate in an outreach program.

A generation or two ago, religious Jews wore kippot. But we were frightened when it came to wearing them publicly, except for the most densely Jewish populated area, such as Williamsburg or Boro Park. We were physically afraid of doing so, because of anti-Semitic taunts and attacks. Socially, there were those who were very strict about forbidding religious students from wearing the kippah in public. Today, one finds the kippah in secular high-schools and colleges, in graduate schools and professional schools, and in the streets as well.

When we were children, we simply avoided anti-Semites to the best of our ability. If we encountered them, we fled. Many of today's Jewish youngsters are training themselves to offer resistance and not "take it lying down."

I admire such spunk and pride. Of course, I do not agree that such militancy must be the automatic response of Jewish leadership. Indeed, I am distrustful of any automatic response by leadership! Every issue must be analyzed according to its merits. Youth must "do its thing," but leaders must do "their thing" -- and that is, act responsibly. Whether it be a militant reaction or a decision to say nothing, it must be undertaken on the basis of the merits of specific issues.

But the larger questions of communal policy aside, our religious Jewish youth today is an improvement over much of the past. This is true not only for Orthodox youth, but also for much of non-Orthodox youth which in so many ways is superior to their counterparts of 20 or 40 years ago! Jewishly committed youth, even if non-observant and non-Orthodox, is often sensitive and searching and respectful. Anyone wants a description of the boorishness and vulgarity and self-hatred of non-religious Jews of a couple of generations ago, consider how many of them are no different today, show that they are far from young. Thus, this week there appeared the following small item in The New York Times:

The International Ladies' Garments Workers Union, the Amalgamated Clothing Workers and the Seafarers International Union, gave a cocktail party one evening in honor of the Jewish Daily Forward, the Yiddish language

paper that bills itself as "America's only daily labor newspaper."

On the tables of hors d'oeuvres were ham, bacon, large and small shrimps and Alaska king crab.

Said one of the imbibers, "There is nothing here that a Jew could eat."

I doubt if that could happen today, most certainly not in quite so vulgar a manner, by young Jews. But then again, the Jewish Daily Forward is the same newspaper that about 50 years ago, in response to a letter from a reader in its famous "Bintel Brief," declared that circumcision was *א פארשימצונג מכה*, a mouldy custom that we should long ago have gotten rid of!

Of course, this by no means implies that young Jews of the past were all stagnating and negative, while all young Jews today are paragons of virtue. Not at all! Such an assertion would be guilty of being as simplistic as the reverse thesis. But I do want to question, even if hyperbolically, the assumption that things are always getting worse. They are not, in this respect, and we ought to be extremely pleased at this phenomenon.

So, to our young people of The Jewish Center who today celebrate Youth Shabbat, I would hold up Abraham as the model of their aspirations. Give up nothing of the greatness of the past, but improve on it instead!

The Rabbis tell us that Abraham, who was the chief of a great tribe, struck a coin for his realm, and it was an unusual one: *זקן וזקנה מצד*. On one side was the picture of an old man and an old woman, on the other side a picture of a boy and a girl.

Both of these are necessary. Do not yield on the old virtues, represented by the *זקן* and *זקנה*: Continue undiminished the entire, sacred heritage of Jewish character of compassion, kindness, modesty, Torah, mitzvot, self-sacrifice. But always improve on the past! Bring to these principles the gifts of youth: passion, pride, optimism, verve, vigour, all the qualities associated with *בחור ובתולה*.

On this Youth Shabbat, we affirm that we are proud that our young people are continuing the past; prouder yet, that they are improving it; and proudest of all, that all of us realize that the older generation (symbolized by the old man and old woman) and the younger generation (symbolized by the boy and girl) are merely two sides of the same coin.