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"EMERGING FROM THE CAVE"

I. Two Ways

Ever since the Emancipation, religious Jewry has suffered a constant attrition. This deterioration in numbers and intensity of commitment has been most noticeable the past two or three decades. How have we reacted to it? What ought be our policy? Several tendencies are worthy of mention.

The first is the way of despair. One contemplates the unfavorable circumstances and merely posts an obituary notice. But nothing is done; one goes about the old ways without any change. In the face of hopelessness, fear drives one to dull, mechanical repetition. Thus, heavily endowed American Jewish organizations continue in the same rut, repeat the same tired formulae, and chant the same irrelevant litanies. They bravely fight anti-Semitism, while Semitism is dying within them. They are heroic partisans of "the wall of separation" between Religion and State, at a time when Religion is being drained of its vital sap. Today's "liberals" often fight yesterday's battles; it is a sign of despair in today's campaigns. They have given up on tomorrow.

There is a second tendency. There are some who maintain a stubborn refusal to yield, who have high resolve and persistent determination to continue on the highest level of Judaism, but in ever-shrinking circles. Theirs is the gesture of withdrawal, of isolation, of a conscious and conscientious ignoring of the rest of the world, of all other Jews. The prize they want to capture is "tomorrow"; the price they are willing to pay is "today."

As between these two attitudes, I would much rather choose the second. I do not for one moment believe that the Jewish people and the Torah will ever disappear. If I were faced with the choice of totally embracing this world or totally rejecting it — I would reject it. Our civilization, never let us for one moment forget, is the one which sired an Auschwitz and other such illegitimate obscenities; it is a civilization which, without any affront to its conscience, produced a Hiroshima. Our culture is neither inherently better, nor more guaranteed of survival, than others before it. Jewishly, I prefer — if I would *have* to make a choice — to be a withdrawn and hemmed-in Somebody, than a dissipated and diluted Nobody. I prefer being a neurotic Jew to not being a Jew at all.

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