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UNION OF ORTHODOX JEWISH CONGREGATIONS OF AMERICA



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66th Anniversary National
Biennial Convention
Shoreham Hotel, Washington, D. C.
Tel.: ADams 4-0700, Press Room

FOR RELEASE: After 8 p.m. Friday, November 27, 1964

CONVENTION RELEASE V

WASHINGTON -- The need to encourage "an open and honest socio-cultural dialogue" between Catholic and Jewish leaders based on "solid mutual respect" following the recent Vatican declaration on the Jews, was stressed here tonight (Friday, November 27) by a leading American rabbi who called upon the orthodox Jewish community to play a greater role in intergroup relations.

In an address to the 66th Anniversary National Biennial Convention of the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America, Rabbi Norman Lamm of the Jewish Center, New York, and lecturer in philosophy at Yeshiva University, said that on the social, cultural and political levels, "Jews must engage in full and earnest dialogue with all other Americans. In area, orthodox Jews have been delinquent in the past. We must no longer sit aside and look with disdain upon history; we must participate in it fully."

Rabbi Lamm, who was the founder andfirst editor of Tradition, the organ of the Rabbinical Council of America, hailed the Vatican statement of the Jews as "a historic turning point." While noting that the statement was "essentiably evangelical" and that it "intends a universal affirmation of the foundations of Christianity," Rabbi lamm told the 1,800 delegates that "in this the Catholics are completely within their rights and Jews can have no quarrel with such efforts, provided they are open, undisguised and accord with the methods of a free society. On our part, we shall continue to cherish the eschatological visions of the Jewish prophets, to whom the "end of days' means that each people will abandon idolatry and return to the Lord, each in its own idiom and according to itsown inner nature and traditions."

The Jewish religious leader criticized, however, what he termed a "negative" attitude of the Church towards the State of Israel. A state that is recognized by all the West, by Communist countries and by some Moslem nations", he declared, "is still ignored by the Vatican. We recognize the Vatican's concerns for Catholics in Arab countries. We do not dismiss political considerations... But in this post-Auschwitz age, after the dramatic impact of 'The Deputy' and more recent revelations about the moral collapse of the Church during the War because of considerations of this very same nature - at a time of this sort, such excuses can no longer be seriously entertained. Israel is the land to which most of the refugees of German fury and Christian silence fled, If only as a simple act of historic justice, it must be recognized and befriended".

By the same token, Rabbi Lamm declared, "the American Jewish community will have to learn to accept some profound and thoroughgoing criticism of its own axioms and purposes as a result of this dialogue". He cited as an example what he described as the "resentful" reaction by most American Jews to an editorial in the Jesuit journal. "America" sharply reprimanding American Jews for their position on the role of religion in public life.

"The reaction was wrong", he declared, "whatever our position was or is, and without prejudice to it, the question was legitimate. It asked us to define our purposes, our committeents, our goals. It offered us an opportunity, in the give-and-take of genuine dialogue, to clarify for ourselwes as well as to others what it means to be a Jewish community whether or not we really have genuine spiritual ends in addition to our general social liberalism, and what it is that is distinctively Jewish, in the religious and historical sense, about our community." He added:

"In order to do both restrain our own fellow-Jews from a fruitless and perilous theological dialogue, and to encourage an open and honest socio-cultural dialogue - orthodox Jews must become active in general Jewish communal life like never before. We must no longer, by default, leave the area of inter-faith and inter-group relations to those least committed to Torah and the Jewish Tradition. The insights of the Jewish tradition as we know them must be our major contribution to the organized Jewish community, especially in its relations with the non-Jewish world."

In another address at the same Convention session, Dr. Immanuel Jakobovits, spiritual leader of the Fifth Avenue Synagogue in New York and formerChief Rabbi of Ireland, took issue with recent dire predictions of a "varishing American Jew" which forecast the disappearance of Jewry in this country as a separate identity.

"Orthodox Jews," he declared, "are now the only segment of the American Jewish community which, far from vanishing, is increasing in number." He cited the fact that American Jewry in general has suffered "constant attenuation" through both an abnormally low birthrate and an exceptionally high defection rate through intermarriage and assimilation, a trend which he said was estmated to reduce the proportion of Jews in this country from the present 2.8 percent to 1.9 percent by the turn of the centry.

He said that orthodox Jews, on the other hand, "were now gaining at both ends, enjoying an appreciably higher birth rate and a far smaller rate of religious desertions than the rest of the community."

Noting the importance of the nation's Hebrew Day schools in providing leadership for orthodox Jewry, Rabbi Jakobovits called on the Convention delegates to plan the "communalization" of intensive Jewish education through the inclusion of an education levy on all synagogue dues.

This, he said, "would ensure that every orthodox Jew, by joining a synagogue, would become a member of the community and not merely of a congregation. At the same time, such a scheme might help to initiate that cohesion among Orthodox congregations which was essential if the extraordinary opportunities now before the Orthodox community were to be fully and constructively exploited in the mighty effort to preserve and strengthen the religious character of American Jewry."

Rabbi Ralph Pelcovitz, spiritual leader of Congregation Knesseth Israel in Far Rockaway, N.Y., and a former president of the Rabbinical Alliance of America, said in another Convention address that the "sad failure of the major Jewish organizations -- religious and secular -- to stem the tide of assimilation, intermarriage and the increasing loss of Jewish identity" was directly responsible for the so-called "vanishing Jew."

"When authentic Judaism vanishes," he declared, "the Jew becomes invisible as well. The tenuous ties of a new generation to Jewishness, the blurred lines of demarcation between Jew and non-Jew, testify to the bankruptcy of numerically superior grouping and organization on the American Jewish scene."

Describing the orthodox Jews as an "elite, educated, qualitative grouping within Jewry, he said that though relatively small in number, their influence would be increasingly felt in many areas. "Responsible Jewish leaders are beginning to recognize this new breed of "influentials" -- the intelligent, sophisticated, articulate committed orthodox Jew."

What is of equal importance, he declared, "is that the non-Jewish community, especially its religious leaders, will very soon come to realize that they may have been conducting their dialogue with Jewish leaders who represent in many cases, the vanishing Jew. The next few years may well witness a recognition on their part that the authentic spokesmen and leaders are those who speak on behalf of and represent authentic Judaism -- namely orthodox Judaism."

At an earlier session, the UOJCA delegates approved a resolution calling for the creation of a special coordinating committee of national orthodox Jewish organizations. A proposal by Reuben E. Gross, chairman of the UOJCA Commission on Councils and Regions, calling for immediate withdrawal of the Orthodox Union from the Synagogue Council of America, the coordinating agency for the lay and rabbinic Jewish national bodies, was rejected by the delegates.

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, outstanding Jewish religious authority of the present day, was the keynote speaker at last night's plenary session.

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