

"THE RELIGIOUS SITUATION IN ISRAEL"

Were I to condense my three-month's observation and assessment of the religious situation in Israel into one brief statement, I would say that despite the many negative features, the prospects for creative change and improvement are splendid; however, despite -- or, perhaps, because of -- all these promises, it is disappointing that so much more could be done than is being done at present.

I

With all the beauty and naturalness of religion in Israel, there are, to be sure, occasional anti-religious expressions that are somewhat disturbing. It was reported to me quite casually, for instance, that in one mixed religious-non-religious neighborhood, non-observant children just recently come from Latin America often shout at their observant peers, "Shabbes," the derisive term for Sabbath-observers. It is depressing that, in the Jewish state, Sabbath observers should find it difficult to obtain employment in certain branches of the communications media, especially television, and in the arts; in Israel one does not even have a law to which to appeal as we do in New York State. One often hears bitter

criticism of religious Jews because Yeshiva students are exempt from the army. This is unfortunate, because it does not take into consideration the fact that the numbers involved are rather small; that Yeshiva students are exempt from military service in most countries in the Free World; that the Yeshivot face a severe problem because a three-year interruption does, indeed, make it difficult to resume Torah studies upon the discharge of the young man from the army. Most important, the criticism does not take into consideration the fact that the so-called "modern Yeshivot," those that recognize the State and feel an obligation to and an involvement in it, have devised a system called hesder, according to which the student will spend his period of army service alternating with study at the Yeshiva. Yet, it remains a severe problem, and unquestionably the religious groups have not done enough in order to meet the criticism and obviate it. Right or wrong, the result of the exemption is a hillul ha-shem.

There are also moral problems in Israel. Some of them are social and economic in origin, the result of the tremendous displacement of fairly primitive Jewish communities who, cut off from their traditional mooring, find themselves lost in Israel. They are, therefore, subject to many of the moral ills which are to be sociologically expected. Worse yet, Westernization seems to be

going along at full pace, and Westernization means Americanization, in this case -- the import of all the filth and corruption and decadence which have marked our country these past several years. Almost all of the degrading Broadway nude shows have been staged in Tel Aviv, and Israeli versions added to it, a kind of "second generation filth," missing none of the various versions and varieties of obscenity.

One meets with a surprising ignorance of religion in Israel. I spoke to a group of distinguished men and women, including leading members of Knesset, journalists, and war heroes, and in the course of my remarks I mentioned Rosh Hodesh. Afterwards, one of the participants told me that I should have explained what I was talking about, for a number of people did not know what Rosh Hodesh is! And when "Gesher" ran its seminar for some of the most brilliant high school students from non-religious schools from Tel Aviv, Haifa, and Jerusalem, we discovered that we had to do exactly what we must do when running similar seminars in the United States for non-observant teen-agers: we had to announce the pages in the Siddur, show them the proper posture, explain what the prayers were all about. Except for their knowledge of Hebrew, they were not essentially different from American children.

Yet that very fact in itself -- ignorance -- is, by some

paradoxical calculus, a source of optimism. For to the very largest extent, the agonizing religious problems of Israel are not usually the result of intrinsic hostility and inner antagonism to religion, but rather extrinsic, imposed upon us from without, the result of such factors ^{as} _^ignorance, the lingering inheritance of galut and galut-ideologies, and the cheap mimicry which pretends to art and esthetics in Israel as in the rest of the world today. But as long as it is external, it can be gotten rid of.

Thus, we read today that God promises Israel its redemption in the words והוצאתי את ישראל ממתחת סבלות מצרים, "I will take you out from under the burdens of Egypt." Rashi adds three apparently superfluous words: קושי מלחמה, the trouble of the load or burden of Egypt. Apparently, what Rashi meant to explain was the strange Biblical preposition מתחת, "from under." The troubles that Egypt visited upon us were like a load placed on our backs, they were external -- and what comes from without can be pushed outside again; what is superimposed is something from which ^{we} _^may be redeemed. The same might be said about the religious problems in Israel. They are many, they are difficult, they are perplexing. But it is not true that Jews are basically antagonistic to Torah. And if so, we are right in the hope that the אנשי תורה will yet be taken off our shoulders.

A troublesome aspect of the problems is that they are often self-incurred by religious Jewry. In Israel, as in America, we religious Jews seem to have a supernatural talent for putting our worst foot forward. Our penchant for appearing in the meanest possible light, for making available the most unfavorable interpretation of our acts and intentions, continues at full stride in the religious community in the Jewish State.

Also contributing to the problem is the fact that religion is to so large an extent politicized in Israel; Torah is often identified with religious parties. The official religious organizations of the communities, the Moatzot Datot or Religious Councils, are chosen not by direct election but by appointment by the various political parties, religious and non-religious. There is much to be said about this problem of the link between politics and religion in Israel, more than can be contained in one brief talk. However, this much should be said: the politicization of religion is responsible, in large measure, for the alienation of many non-observant Jews from Torah. Yet one may not be so naive, simplistic, and unsophisticated as to place all the blame for religious problems at the footstep of the political parties. Ideally, of course, there should be no necessity for a religious political party. But we do not live in an ideal world, and in the

realities that prevail in the State of Israel today, we simply cannot dispense with religious political parties. The great problem is that too many people, especially those affiliated with these parties, imagine that politics is the only legitimate way for religion to express itself in Israel. For myself, I left with the impression that, as things are today, religion cannot do altogether without politics in Israel; but that we will never be able to do ^{at all} with politics alone.

The religious situation in Israel is aggravated by the fact that most of the religious leadership has not really gone through the modern experience. The synagogue itself is not accepted as a very important institution. Most synagogues confine their Shabbat services to an hour and a half or so quite early on Saturday mornings. The women usually do not come to pray. The absence of the sermon means that it is possible for Jews to come to pray, week after week, and not hear one devar Torah, or one suggestion on how Torah can be made relevant to modern Israel and contemporary life. Usually the services are indecorous, and the weddings, funerals, and other religious functions undignified. The rabbinate is largely relevant to the conditions that prevailed fifty years ago -- with some notable and happy exceptions. Most rabbis are spiritual leaders of neighborhoods, not congregations,

and hence have very little contact with their people. Yet the fault is not entirely that of the rabbinate. One of these happy exceptions, a young rabbi, told me at the end of a meeting that I had with some 25 rabbis of Jerusalem, "I certainly go after my people, I look for them throughout the community. But I cannot invite them back to me, for my synagogue is poor, in a disgraceful and delapidated condition, and there is no way I have of correcting the situation."

II

Yet, having mentioned all these negative features, I confess to you that I found the positive signs far more encouraging than I believed before I came. There is real responsiveness to the first efforts that religious Jewry is now making to reach out to the non-affiliated or non-observant, efforts such as are being undertaken by Gesher and by Talat and similar groups. In the near future there will be announced the first effort by a "modern Yeshiva" to provide continuing talmudic education for University students. Unbelievably (for an American audience), heretofore, a young man could either attend Yeshiva or the University, but he would not be permitted by the Yeshiva to do both. As a result, many Yeshiva students who went on to University studies were cut off

from any continuing Torah education. Now, however, this one courageous institution is preparing a Yeshiva program for those who study at the University as well. It will not be done without difficulty, but the fear of the right wing must sooner or later cease to paralyze all our efforts.

Plans are now materializing for something that has long been taken for granted in this country, yet is presently unthinkable in Israel -- a Seminary to prepare rabbis for the Diaspora and for Israel as well. I have no doubt that it will incur the violent opposition of the right wing, whose position must be understood sympathetically -- but not necessarily accepted. Possibly, the controversy will make the Shaare Zedek dispute look like a child's game. But it will have to be done, with our help from the United States, if Torah is to survive in the modern world.

The quantitative picture can be quite deceiving. The number of people who vote for religious parties is approximately 15%; yet there are many, many more religious Jews than this number would indicate. One has but to visit the headquarters of the Histadrut and notice the large number of men wearing the kippot serugot, the diminutive head-covers, to be aware of this. I had the pleasure of speaking at a seminar of Kibbutzniks at Kfar Saba, to people who come from non-religious Kibbutzim; they listened with

avid and sympathetic interest to lectures on Torah and the world-view of Torah. And during my stay in Israel, the newspapers reported that the soldiers at the front lines at Suez had as their major request for literature back home, one book -- the Tehillim, the Psalms.

Finally, it was a pleasure to learn, towards the end of my stay, that in one particular Kibbutz, services were held for the first time in its history this past Yom Kippur. Over 70% of the residents fasted, and the remainder ate in their private quarters because the kitchen was closed.

One finds, therefore, a *mélange* of indications and symptoms, which altogether spell both danger and opportunity, depending on what we shall do.

III

One cannot discuss religion in Israel today without mentioning the Six Day War. The war was in itself a turning point, and it is being thought through and felt through to this day. I confess that I came thinking that the effects had worn off, and that in its place had come apathy, indifference, and even cynicism. I feared that Israelis were allowing their basic self-confidence to turn their interpretation of the war into a kind of arrogance,

a pharoahnic superciliousness, saying, as we were warned by Moses (Dt. 8:17) not to, *כח' וזכ' יצ' וזכ' יצ' וזכ' יצ'*, "my strength and power alone created for me all this wealth"; or as the Pharoah of a later Biblical period said, in today's Haftorah, *ה' יצ' וזכ' יצ' וזכ' יצ'*, "The Nile is mine and I have made it (or: myself)". I brought these biases and apprehensions with me, determined to expose and discuss them, at a lecture I was invited to deliver at the *ה' יצ' וזכ' יצ' וזכ' יצ'*, the Military Academy for Education. Here, at a special seminar which is attended for about two or three weeks a year by senior officers, from the rank of Colonel or Major and up, I addressed 25 such officers -- who were, to ^{my} American eyes, frighteningly young. I told them that, speaking as a religious Jew, I was afraid that their interpretation of the war was more in accord with what I described as Pharoah's thinking than Jewish thinking; and that were I to speak as a secularist, the same argument would be enunciated as a charge of militarism raising its head in Israel, both in its military establishment and its civil society. I exaggerated the argument, and my extravagance was meant to elicit their responses. I was curious. And my curiosity was more than satisfied when they rose as one man and vigorously denied, with great passion, that Israelis, including their military leaders

and heroes, believe that all credit is due to them. They all indicated that, somehow, by some means, the victory implied something other than Israel's military ability and Arab ineffectualness, and something more than sheer good luck. I am not satisfied that this is the final interpretation they ought to have. But I am enormously pleased, because I find in this attitude tremendous religious potentialities. I agree with Prof. Heschel that "radical amazement" is the underlying mood of the religious individual. As long as Israelis wonder, as long as there is astonishment, as long as there is this amazement at what happened, even if they have not yet formulated the amazement in religious categories, the possibilities are there. With such attitudes, it is simply wrong to categorize the "average" Israeli as "non-religious." They are perhaps still "non-observant," but not really "non-religious."

According to the Jerusalem Talmud, the reason that we drink four cups of wine at the Passover Seder is to accord with the four synonyms of redemption which we read of in today's Sedra: *והוצאתי, וגאלתי, ואצלת, ואקדתי*. However, the commentaries ask: Why, then, do we pour a fifth cup of wine at the Seder, that known as *כוס של אלוהים*? And why do we not drink it? The "Netziv," the great teacher from Volozhin, explained that the fifth cup comes as a symbol of another synonym used in the same passage, the verse, *וידעתם כי אני ה' אלקיכם בהוציאתי אתכם ממצרים*, "And ye shall know that I am the Lord your God who takes you out from

under the burdens of Egypt." There are really two redemptions -- the physical redemption, which is the political emancipation of the people and the spiritual redemption, which is the awareness that the first redemption came from God and was not solely the act of man. Because it takes spiritual maturity, time, and perspective, to understand and acknowledge the *קוס'ל*, the fifth cup, symbol of *קוס'ל*, is designated the Cup of Elijah, for only in the days of the Messiah, for whom Elijah is the harbinger, will the full effect of *קוס'ל* become known to mankind. We therefore put it aside and do not drink it.

I might add this: if the spiritual redemption means that the people of Israel, the subjects of this victory, will come to acknowledge at least by the sense of amazement, by the sense of standing before the ineffable and the miraculous, the intercession of God, then the greatest vindication of Israel and of God is when the enemies of Israel will come to acknowledge His victory, when Pharoah and Egyptians will concede that "the Lord is God."

This has happened, in some measure of speaking, in our days too. Permit me to read to you a passage from the memoirs of a man who is not considered a friend of the State of Israel:

Egypt is in grave straits today. There is no question in my mind that Israel started the war against Egypt (in 1967). But there are a couple of things I cannot understand

that happened before Israel's attack on Egypt. It is not clear to me why Egypt demanded that U Thant remove the U.N. troops from the border. These forces were a restraining force on the Israeli aggressors. I remember we voted in favor of sending a U.N. peace-keeping force to the Near East. Nor can I understand what goal Egypt thought it was pursuing when it closed the Suez Canal. Israel took advantage of these actions on Egypt's part. And another thing: if Egypt was prepared for war against Israel, then why was Israel able to crush the Egyptian army in six days? All these questions puzzle me.

Thus spake Nikita Khrushchev, in the Memoirs smuggled to the West and published throughout the Western world. He says that he does not understand these events, and that they puzzle him. He means that he is amazed by the miracle -- and that the miracle-doer is the Lord, God of Israel. Khrushchev is about to say that the Lord performs miracles, even if he does not believe in Him...

IV

Torah Judaism has great possibilities in Israel, greater than it has had in many years. But what will happen from here on depends on what we religious Jews do, whether in Israel or in America.

I am convinced that, because of the matter of self-identity as Jews which I discussed last week, the same effort extended there

will achieve greater results than they do here, although they will call for an investment of more courage and even heartache.

It is my firm belief that now is the time for the great American contribution to Israel. Every aliyah made its contribution -- the Russian, the German, the South African, the Oriental. Now is the time for American Jews to make their unique contribution, both to society in general and to religion.

This contribution must be made both by American olim and American golim, by American Jews who emigrate to Israel and to those of us who remain behind.

To an extent, Judaism is in the same position in Israel today as it was in the United States forty or fifty years ago. We American Jews who have lived through this, who can show the scars and the trophies, can now apply to Israel the lessons that we have learned and the experience we have gained in the Western diasporas.

American olim must contribute American-style congregations -- though there is much wrong with our congregations; American-type rabbis -- though God knows there is much that is wrong with us; decorous services, modern concepts, techniques for dealing with youth, the philosophy required to embrace living in two worlds.

And American golim, those of us who are still here, can

assist in two ways. First we must help finance the American olim in their efforts, and we must inspire them by a continuing relationship with them and with all the rest of Israel. Second, we must build and improve our own institutions, so that they serve as a model in the ongoing dialogue with modernity that we must carry on both in Israel and in America.

The prophet exclaimed, כ' מצי"ן | תל | תורה יצא ה' מירושלם
"For Torah shall go forth from Zion, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem."

Yet Rabbenu Tam, the grandson of Rashi and the father of the Tosafists, had no compunctions about paraphrasing the prophet and exclaiming, concerning the sages of the great Italian Jewish Centers of his day, כ' אמרי | תל | תורה יצא ה' מאלינץ, that Torah will go forth from Bari and the word of the Lord from Trento.

The hegemony of Torah for the House of Israel throughout the world can be assured only by a cooperative effort of Israeli Jewry and American Jewry. For as David said of Jerusalem: it is | יצא | באר | שוקדה | יצא |, a city that flourishes through cooperation.

Jerusalem must always remain the center; but a center must have a periphery, and only when there is a vital exchange and equilibrium between center and periphery does the circle of Jewish life expand and thrive.

So, to complete the chapter from which the last verse was taken, we say to Israel: *שְׁלָמֵינוּ אֶלְכֶם וְאֶל כָּל הָעָם*, on behalf of our brethren and our friends throughout the world we wish only peace for you.

And to the Jews of the Diaspora, one who returns from Israel brings the greetings *שְׁלָמֵינוּ מִבֵּית ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ אֱלֹהֵיכֶם שָׁלוֹם*, on behalf of the House of the Lord our God, from which, as the Talmud taught, the Shechinah never departed throughout the centuries, we seek what is good for you.