AMERICAN JUDAISM: THE RITES OF THE PASSAGE

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The Jewish calendar includes three pilgrimage holidays, during which masses of people traditionally flock to Jerusalem, the focal point of Judaism. These holidays are Passover, Shavuot and Sukkot. Modern American Judaism boasts three pilgrimage fests of its own, during which people flock to the metropolitan focal points, the New Yorks and Bostons, to demonstrate their brand of Judaism. These events are: the Israel solidarity parade on Yom Haatzmaut, the Support Russian Jewry rally following Simhat Torah, and the "kick-off" program of the CJP campaign.

On Nov. 30, 1975, the Jews of Boston gathered to celebrate the opening of the CJP drive, witnessing a program entitled "Proclaim Liberty." They heard the 1976 General Chairman read a passage. The scene at Hynes Auditorium resembled those that occured during the days of the Second Temple, when the scribes periodically read from the scriptures in front of large crowds. The American Jews listened to this poem, as if it were indeed the canonized basis for their Judaism. I shall proceed with this paper under the assumption that it is. From this point on, I shall refer to the following quotation as the Passage.

> If I am a Jew, I am commitment
> To ideas trancending time,
> To values spanning centuries,
> To faith surviving tragedy.
> I am Maccabee and Minuteman,
> Rabbinic scholar and founding father,
> Jew and American.
> I am pain in a Syrian prison
> I am tears on a cheek in Siberia
> I am sweat on a Negev brow
> I am loneliness in a bare room in Brighton
> They are me, I am they; I care, I give. (1)

When American Jews hear the Passage, and other statements like it, they immediately empty their pockets with religious fervor. The intent of this report is to examine this fervor, using the Passage as a guide. What motivates the American Jew? Deeply held self evident

convictions or guilt feelings? Does he actually feel that "I am they," or does he privately say, "I am me, but I feel responsible for them and shall give money to get them out of my conscience"? The latter seems to be the more accurate description, as the Bassage represents only a surface-reality; it does not represent what the Jews are, but what they strive to be. The fulfillment of its words is the contemporary goal of life. The Passage is the American Jewish Torah; it is the key to finding meaning in a Jewish life while maintaining a guiltless secular life. In reality, all the Passage does is give Jews an outlet for dodging Judaism while remaining Jews. For the American Jew knows that if he succeeds in fulfilling its words, he will be regarded by one and all, including himself, as a good Jew. For him, that is the ultimate reward.

A problem in our competitive society is that one's self impression is determined largely by his public image, so one must constantly show others that "I care, I give, I feel, I cry, I believe," in order to be a good Jew. The focus of attention shifts from the self to the Goldbergs next door. Oftentimes, Jewish social interaction becomes a forum for the creation and release of tension, since each Jew is trying to show everyone else that he is a good Jew; there is no other way of proving it to himself. The community is turned into a veritable battlefield instead of a place where people can share ideas and find meaning in each others lives.

Let us take a common example. Prayer should be an intimate experience involving the fullest self expression and inner submission, along with a strong communal feeling. The American Jew does not follow these norms. In the synagogue, he usually thinks of himself only in comparison with others and with the model of the good Jew. He asks himself, "Am I

davening loud enough? Am I on the right page? Is he on the right page? Am I properly dressed? When is the service over? Who is sponsoring the Kiddush?" The article by Richard Rubenstein, "A Rabbi Dies," touches upon the competition that goes on during a service, both between the congregants and the rabbi and among the congregants themselves.

With such a hectic outside world, it is no wonder that the American Jew goes home seeking peace--outside the realms of Judaism. Yet, this individual leaves the community wars with a strange feeling of satisfaction. He has done something "Jewish," albeit that it had no special significance to him. He gave, he sweated, he cried. Now, he feels, the goal--to be a good Jew--is just that much more within his reach. But the search brings with it more grief than satisfaction, even at home. Where are the rewards? Where is the "pot at the end of the rainbow," he asks. There is no pot, for it is a rainbow without colors. For the American Jew, the Passage brings only frustration and guilt.

Because the Passage is so influential, it merits closer examination. First, let me set some guidelines. In my (humble) opinion, a workable religion must: a) answer profound questions about the self and its destiny, b) provoke constant self reflection, and c) provide outlets for the expression of all emotions, not just depression and despair. Conversely, American Judaism's main characteristics seem to be vicariousness and negativism.

The Passage can be divided into four parts, three main sections and a conclusion. (I have provided an extra copy of it as the appendix) The first section, including lines 1-4, deals with several themes, all of which can be placed under the general heading of "Commitment." The American Jew must be committed to his religion, to the common history of his people, and to the linkage of the generations. The understanding of these concepts is secondary to the necessity for commitment. It is

more important to do than to comprehend and learn. Herein lies the basis for Arthur Hertzberg's "Jew in public, human being in private" theory, as the doing becomes the end, not the means. Although a ritual may lack meaning, it must be done; so it might as well be done in front of others. To be committed is to be a good Jew.

Religion: ("ideas transcending time") The Passage gives meaning to the three-day-a-year Jew. He sees a new significance in his attending services on the High Holidays and on the occasional Shabbat. It is important, he thinks, to at least pretend that there is a living religion resembling the old, classical one. To him, the real living religion is the commitment. The motions gone through at the temple are significant only in that respect. Conservative and Reform Judaism have made things easier for him, allowing him to keep the commitment without upsetting his secular, everyday life. Kashrut and Shabbat are no longer part of the essential commitment. The "burden"of Judaism has become lighter. What used to take a lifetime can now be done in three days a year. But it is still commitment.

History: ("values spanning centuries") In his short story,"The Conversion of the Jews," Philip Roth gives this description of Ozzie Freedman's mother lighting the Friday night candles.

> When his mother lit candles she would move her two arms towards her, dragging them through the air, as though persuading people whose minds were half made up. And her eyes would get glassy with tears....As she touched the flaming match to the unlit wick of a Sabbath candle, the phone rang, and Ozzie, standing only a foot from it, plucked it off the receiver and held it muffled to his chest. When his mother lit candles Ozzie felt there should be no noise; even breathing if you could manage, should be softened. Ozzie pressed the phone to his breast and watched his mother dragging whatever she was dragging and he felt his own eyes get glassy. His mother...had begun to feel the weight of her own history. ③

American Jews constantly look backwards through their history, trying to discover themselves; trying to solve that "crisis of identity." Religious acts, such as lighting the candles, are actually

attempts at imitating previous generations; to promote continuity is to display commitment. Ozzie's mother feels "the weight of her own history" as she performs the ritual, her history being synonymous with her people's history. As she waves her arms, she probably pictures her mother and grandmother doing the same thing. As the tear falls from her face, she can imagine the Czar's cossacks stealing the family candlesticks and breaking them in two. Does she see the Sabbath Queen? Does she feel the beauty of the Day of Rest? Does she sense the holiness of the moment? Her eyes are glassy, She thinks of the sadness of "her" past, not the sacredness of the present. The commitment is to history.

Daniel Bell, in American Judaism, Adventure in Modernity (p63), states that "to be a Jew is to be part of a community woven by memory--the memory whose knots are tied by the yizkor." This logically brings us to...

The Linkage of Generations: ("faith surviving tragedy") Here is where commitment and guilt are virtually synonymous for the American Jew. Faith does not simply survive in tragedy; it seems to thrive because of it. Death is the only part of the life cycle that can not be influenced by science and secularity. The many questions, fears and superstitions can only be dealt with in a religious sense. Thus, a death in the family will often drive a Jew toward a stronger commitment. He will say kaddish and strictly follow the laws of burial and mourning. What force, besides superstition, drives this secular mourner to such a religious commitment? In America, where the family bonds have been severely shaken, that force is usually guilt. The Jew says Kaddish because his father would have wanted it; he goes to shul every morning at 6AM because he always slept late on Shabbat when Dad wanted to walk with him. To suffer, to sacrifice, to bear the burden for those who bore it for him: that is commitment. It makes for a "Good Jew," and also a good son, something he never was when Papa was alive. For each American generation, it seems, has been ashamed of the previous generation.

"My dominant childhood memory," writes Meyer Levin in In Search, "was

of fear and shame at being a Jew."(p13) He hates them, and he hates hating them. The guilt builds up inside until the trigger of death releases it. So, guilt causes commitment. How is this guilt alleviated?

Basically, it is thrust upon the children, for children are another way of fulfilling the commitment. Even if Judaism has no special meaning to the parents, they send their children to Hebrew schools so they can get some Jewish background. Jewish rituals have always had some focus on the young ("And thou shalt tell thy son"). Now, that focus has itself become the meaning for the ritual, growing out of its rightful proportion. Marshall Sklare writes how Jewish celebrations in America must be centered on the child. For instance, "Passover and Hanukkah have special appeal, for both commemorate joyous occasions in keeping with the norms of optimism, fun and gratifaction...in which children should be reared. And the parent feels that having provided his child "positive" associations with Jewishness, the child will have no cause to reject his heritage."[3]

If the child accepts his heritage, the parent's guilt is alleviated. The parent fulfills that part of the commitment. He is one step closer to being a good Jew. This is American Judaism as it is vicariously expressed through the dead ancestors and the growing children, Nowhere does the commitment relate to the self.

Section two of the Passage deals exclusively with the theme of dualism: Jew and American. (lines 5,6,7) Ideally they are of equal importance, as a Jew should be able to take something from one and further enrich his life with a portion of the other. They are equal, compatible, side by side; a good Jew is a good American.

Unsing this part of the Passage as their guide, American Jews outwardly strive to find the perfect combination. In reality, they must sacrifice more of the Jewish side then they are willing, or able, to admit. In <u>In Search</u>, Meyer Levin constantly deals with this theme,

eventually discovering that it is impossible "to take from one without taking away from the other."[4]

One of his first novels, The Old Bunch, offended many Jews because it reminded them that Jews are not perfect and can oftentimes act like normal, or even partially corrupt, human beings. (Philip Roth has done the same thing in this generation) His editor wanted him to change the names of the characters and make the Bunch a multi-ethnic gang. Community leaders were fearful that "the goyim" would run wild with the novel, using it as a springboard for anti-Semitism. Levin raged at this, saying, "The Old Bunch had offended those who were assimiltionists at heart; they felt somehow threatened, as though I were saying that they were really not Americans, instead of simply reminding them that they were still Jews."[5]

Here is the crux of the dualistic dilemma. How can one be only half Jewish? Where does one draw the line between integration into American society and assimilation? Is there such a line? As Levin questions the essense of his Judaism he wonders whether "one can take what one wants and leave the rest." It seems as if one can not. But to be a good Jew is to be a good American. Or is it? Only in the broadest of terms.

Using these universalistic terms, the Passage equates Judaism with Americanism, trying to make them look compatible. If one can not be equally a Jew and an American in reality, one must at least pretend that it is possible. That can only be done if the expectations for one are diminished; and the suffering side is naturally the Judaic side.

Maccabee and Minuteman: Both represent the universal hero who displays strength and courage. The Maccabee just happens to be Jewish.

Founding father and Rabbinic scholar: The universal values of knowledge, creativity and ingenuity are stressed, showing how Jews and Americans have them in common.

It is possible, in fact necessary, to be both a good Jew and a good American. Thus sayeth the Passage. But the realities of human existence

seem to indicate that American Jews are lying to themselves if they believe that they have found a perfect blend using compromise. The search should not be for compromise, but for a possible mixture that would include the totalities of both. That search would be endless; but as Levin says on the last page of In Search, its endlessness would be a healthy sign.

In section three (lines8-12) lies the basis for Negative Judaism. Pain, sweat, tears and loneliness are felt by Jews everywhere. What of joy, love, beauty and a tightly-knit community? These are not of enough importance to merit admission into the Passage. I have already mentioned how death and guilt have become central in American Judaism and how, except for when the children are involved, celebration has been forced to reside in an insignificant corner. Except for the occasional wedding or bris, Jewish celebrations, even in the synagogue, are focused on the children. The adults are given opportunity to celebrate only through them. Sukkot, the "time of our rejoycing," has been turned into the "rather insignificant holiday between the Yom Kippur yizkor and the Shmini Atzeret yizkor." The celebrations of everyday life which give it meaning and which sanctify each moment (e.g. the brachot) are not present in the Passage or in Jewish America. The timelessness of Shabbat is rarely felt. Yahrzeit, which is supposed to be a happy remembranceof a life that was and a celebration of the soul's ascent to immortality, has become an occasion for only more tears. Where has nature gone? The beautiful wheatfields of the old country have given way to the hot, menacing sun of the Negev. Judaism has become a religion without a smile. The good Jew is the one one that wears a perpetual frown; at least when he is his "Jewish self."

In this section we can also see the extent that guilt motivates the American Jew. In effect, the Passage gives life meaning through suffering. The Jew thinks,"The Jews in Russia and Syria: they are suffering. I must somehow show that I care and am [illegible]

somehow show that I care and am part of a collective Jewish whole; otherwise I can not be a good Jew. I can best demonstrate solidarity by showing that I suffer too. The passage says: I am pain.". Unfortunately, many American Jews can't feel the pain and can only pretend to, trying to convince themselves that they do. American suffering is not caused by Soviet or Syrian torture; it is caused by the guilt for not being able to feel it. The guilt causes loneliness, pain, tears and sweat. They can not rightfully say, "I am they." They can only say,"I sympathize with them." There is a massive difference between the two.

Philip Roth's "Eli the Fanatic" includes an amazing conversation between Eli Peck, the guilt-ridden American Jew, and Tzuref, the deeply religious classical Jew, which demonstrates the lack of a genuine feeling that "I am they." Throughout the discussion, Tzuref forces Eli to feel more and more guilty for his trying to force, in behalf of his middle class Jewish community, a yeshivah Jew to shed his traditional clothes. Here are some excerpts:

> Tzuref: You have the word'suffer' in English?
> Eli: We have the word suffer, we have the word law too.
> Tzuref: Stop with the law! You have the word suffer. Then try it. It's a little thing.
> Eli: They won't...
> Tzuref: But you, Mr. Peck, how about you?
> Eli: I am them, they are me, Mr. Tzuref.
> ...Tzuref:They hide their shame. And you, Mr. Peck, you are shameless?
> Eli: We do it for the children. This is the twentieth century.
> Tzuref: For the goyim maybe, For me it is the fifty-eighth. That is too old for shame.
> (later) Eli: (exhausted) Tzuref, leave me be with that suit (of clothes) I'm not the only lawyer in town. I'll drop the case and you'll get somebody who won't talk compromise. Then you'll have no home, no children, nothing. Only a lousy black suit. Sacrifice what you want. I know what I would do.
> (no reply)
> Eli: It's not me, Mr. Tzuref, it's them.
> Tzuref: They are you.
> Eli: No, I am me. They are them. You are you.

There are probably many American Jews who can truthfully affirm that "I am they," and can feel the pain of their brothers. Most of them either

engage themselves actively, not just philanthropically, in in organizations to help world Jewry, or make aliyah. The ones who remain in America feel another kind of guilt, the guilt for being so well off in America while their brothers abroad are suffering. The Holocaust Complex--"we thrived while they died"--still lives in the hearts of these Jews. "If they die for my sins, I feel guilty." One can feel this kind of guilt only if he knows that his brothers are an extension of himself.

In summation of part three, there are two interpretations to the phrase, "They are me, I am they." One is, "I am me, but I sympathize with them and feel guilty for not being able to feel their grief," and the other is, "I am they, but they suffer and die for me, and I feel guilty for not suffering with them over there. Both interpretations are clouded with negativism, exemplifying the burden of Jewishness (and Judaism). Neither one displays the positive connotations of "we are one." Even at home, in their own community, all the Jews feel (according to the Passage) is the isolation and loneliness of a decrepit room in Brighton (an old section of Boston And second area of settlement). There is nothing that unifies Jews in joy. Perhaps there is nothing in American Judaism that can.

The conclusion of the Passage, the final four words, provides us with the punchline: I care, I give. It is only when one reaches this point that he realizes the goal of the Passage, which is to encourage, using the bait of the reward, the good Jew recognition, American Jews to empty their pockets. Once again, I contend that the Passage represents a twentieth century American Jewish Torah. The goal of the authentic Torah is to lead us towards better and more meaningful lives; the goal of the Passage is to solicit money. From my previous equation,

much can be learned about our advanced society.

To care means to give: Tzdakkah always was a mitzvah, a commandment. Certainly it involved an amount of caring;but more than that it involved a sense of responsibility, not just to other Jews, but to the Biblical commandments that demanded various forms of charity. These commandments no longer hold influence on peoples inner lives; tear-jerking movies, sermons and passages are needed to replace them. That the poor, the aged and the handicapped were the responsibility of each Jew in the community used to be self-evident. No guilt feelings were involved. The poor man was honored, not pitied. That situation has changed dramatically; what once was done because of duty is now done because of caring--whether because of guilt or pure, objective sympathy. Giving tzdakkah used to have positive religious connotations, it being the fulfillment of a mitzvah. Now it is simply the shedding of a burden, the buying of freedom until next year's collection. There is no joy involved. There is also no fulfillment, which is the saddest tragedy of all.

In 1950, a full generation ago, Ludwig Lewisohn wrote The American Jew, from which I have taken these lines. (p128)

> But we are at a turning point. The State of Israel exists. Political agitation has ceased. Secular Zionism no longer suffices as the full content of a Jewish life. Mere charitable endeavors, however necessary,and indeed sacred, have never sufficed. This brilliant structure of American Jewish life, this glittering facade with new synagogues and new centers is in grave danger of turning into a body without a soul, or, into a body with a borrowed and inauthentic soul, a strange, weird, hitherto unheard of thing, large but feeble, busy but ineffectual.... Jews seem unaware of these melancholy circumstances. They act as though American life and American culture were above or, rather, beyond criticism. The people of the Book becomes the people of the Book of the Month Club or of the Literary Guild. It wallows in the common mire and feels self-satisfied, protected, patriotic,

Lewisohn's words are as true now as they were then. To be a Jew in

America means to be committed yet confused, proud yet guilt-ridden, unified yet very much alone. Can the pride yield happiness? Can the commitment yield satisfaction and inner fulfillment? Can unification yield an authentic feeling that "I am they"? And most importantly, can Judaism have any meaning to the American Jew?

These are questions that the Passage can answer only negatively. Before American Jews can realize this, they must pose these same questions to themselves. For, as long as these questions are avoided, the Passage will continue to thrive, while at the same time destroying the foundations of American Judaism. Only after the Passage is "de-canonized" will we be able to turn our attention back to the more important passages of our heritage.