

*Concern for a Positive
Jewish Image Is No Heresy*

Some people are impressed by the gains Orthodox Judaism has achieved in recent decades. But I believe that at least as many are depressed that the image of Orthodox Judaism in the world at large, and among Jews in particular, was never so bad. Not an issue arises but that it is made to appear that the Bible and the Talmud are the repository of all that is evil. These source books are considered intolerant, anti-democratic, narrow, benighted. They breed disunity, fanaticism, even violence.

Certainly, recent events in Israel appear to justify some of these conclusions. Yet people ought to be more circumspect. It would take volumes to make full reply and prove that the charges are unfair. Moreover, one must never forget that the traditional sources are like Scripture. They can be quoted and used by devils as well as saints. And the quotes reveal more about the person doing the quoting than they do about the tradition itself.

Nonetheless, Orthodox Jews ought to be concerned about their image and the image of the tradition. I know that there are many who could not care less. For them it is enough to know they are doing the Lord's work; how others see them or what they do does not evoke a thought. Yet is this proper? Is this the way the tradition would have us feel? Are public relations of no consequence at all?

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik once expressed the view that in halachic decisions one must reckon with public relations. The issue at that time was the propriety of instituting the draft of students of Yeshiva University to serve as U.S. military chaplains. That rabbis would not serve would be poor public relations in the eyes of non-Jews. That non-Orthodox rabbis would serve and Orthodox rabbis would not would be poor public relations in the eyes

of Jews. Such considerations may not be the only ones or the most important ones, but one does not ignore them.

The same reasoning applied to the issue of Orthodox participation in such mixed bodies as the Synagogue Council of America. Would the image of Orthodoxy suffer if such participation came to an end?

In my life I have had to do many things which my non-Jewish colleagues found difficult to understand. I was concerned with the image of Orthodoxy in their eyes, and I always sought to put forth the explanation that they would most respect. And I found biblical warrant for so doing. Moses argued with God that He too must be concerned about what the nations of the earth would say about Him. When the Jews offended against God and God threatened to destroy them, Moses pleaded: "What will the nations say? They will claim that it was because You, God, could not deliver them to the Promised Land that You put an end to them in the wilderness. Consider what this will do to Your image!" (*Exodus* 32:12; *Deuteronomy* 9:28)

Consequently, if Moses was concerned about God's image in the eyes of the gentiles and his argument carried weight with God, who are we not to be concerned with our image in their eyes.

One rabbi sought to establish the same conclusion by referring to the fact that a Jew starts his prayers every morning with a verse that was uttered not by a Jew but by a non-Jewish prophet, Bilaam. Bilaam was the one who beheld the encampment of Jews and proclaimed: "How goodly are thy tents, Oh Jacob, thy tabernacles, Oh Israel." (*Numbers* 24:5) And the Jew enters the synagogue each day reciting that verse. Of all the beautiful verses in the Bible, why did our sages select one composed by a non-Jew, and hardly a friendly non-Jew? The answer one rabbi gives is that our sages wanted us to start the day with the thought that it is important that we ponder each day how we appear in the eyes of non-Jews, and not necessarily the kindest ones.

Thus, to ignore the kind of impression that we are communicating to others is to flout the tradition, not to fulfill it. Yet there are many Jews who almost enjoy making spectacles of themselves and inviting ridicule by their behavior. They think that they are thus proving their greater devotion to God and His Torah.

They also overlook the fact that the basic notion in Judaism - *Kiddush Hashem* and *Chillul Hashem* - sanctifying God's name or desecrating it—are linked with the impact of our behavior on those who behold us. And often it is not only how we look that counts but what we say or do. One is not a hypocrite when one is careful not to say or do what may cause the non-Jew to have a negative view of Judaism. This is a message I have long tried to convey to many who glory in telling things as they superficially appear to be, without thinking of the effect their words are having on others. Sometimes they do this - as does Rabbi Meir Kahane in Israel - without even caring about the hurt they are causing their own people.

There were times in Jewish history when Jews even refrained from killing enemies lest the revenge be taken on coreligionists less able to defend themselves. So mindful were they of the importance of public relations!

From Jewish history we learn that when attacked, a Moslem minority in a Christian country could always threaten the assailants with reprisals against the Christian minorities in other lands, but Jews, even when they were in a position to deal a strong blow, found that they had to subordinate the destiny of their particular community to the welfare of the whole people.

They had a strong sense of solidarity with their coreligionists everywhere, and thus, for example, the Jews of Tulczyn in 1648 refrained from attacking treacherous fellow combatants among the noblemen. They chose to die instead when their leader exhorted them: "We are in exile among the nations. If you lay hands upon the nobles, then all the kings of Christianity will hear of it and take revenge on all our brethren in the dispersion, God forbid."

In our own century we have a tragic but eloquent example of what the Jews always dreaded. I refer to the bullet fired in 1936 by Herschel Grynzpan, whose story is beautifully told by Abram Sacher in "Sufferance Is the Badge." At that time Poland was calling back all of her citizens and Grynzpan's parents were caught in a vise. After receiving a letter from his parents describing their distress, he decided to take revenge by destroying some great Nazi officials, made his way into an embassy in Paris, and killed a third-rate Nazi bureaucrat. That shot was the pretext for the dreadful

pogrom of November 1938, which precipitated a reprisal against all the Jews in Germany.

All of this makes us mindful once again of a prayer we recite after meals when we ask God to help us “find favor in His eyes and in the eyes of man.”

We must ever try to find favor in the eyes of both. Ignoring one or the other is bad religion. Considering both is good religion.