

Sept. 6, 1973

Joy of Being Jewish:

It is enough to compensate for all problems, trials and grim forebodings

Laymen very often say that they would not like to be rabbis because rabbis must please too many people and that is a role they do not cherish.

As for myself, that has not been my problem. I learned long ago that in every service profession one must find favor in the eyes of those whom one serves. Even businessmen must be mindful of the reactions of customers, suppliers, and associates. And rabbis, like Aaron of old, must also charm those whom they have chosen to lead. What is more, if they love people enough, they will not find this difficult to do.

The most difficult problem that I face as a rabbi is that I cannot answer the questions which Jews present to me. I do not refer to questions of Jewish law - most of these I can resolve. And I do not refer to moral issues. As for these I am usually able to provide a grey answer even if not an unequivocal negative or affirmative response. I refer to questions that are theological - why God does what He does, when He does, and how He does. People expect me to explain the inexplicable and I have no answers. In such situations I feel that I am letting them down. They look to me for light and my darkness is as impenetrable as theirs.

Why does God strike them? Why does an innocent child suffer a handicap or untimely death? Why is a righteous man subjected to the ordeals of Job while the wicked and corrupt thrive?

Jews ask these soul-shaking questions not only with regard to their individual lives but also with regard to their collective existence as a people. Why does everything bad happen to Jews? Why is all the world against us? Why must a cause like Zionism - which is perhaps the most just cause ever to make its appearance on the

scene of human history - cope with a hostility that is psychotic in its fierceness?

Was not the year 5734 bad enough for all of us - with its Yom Kippur War, its slaughter, its loneliness? Did 5735 have to bring still more depressing tidings as Israel's one ally - the United States - also became alienated? How much more evil can 5736 bring? Another war? More gains for ruthless and truthless Arabs?

How does a rabbi cope with question such as those? He is expected to have the answers. If not he - who?

This summer I met a man who waged his private war with God. If there were a God, how could He tolerate what is happening to the Jewish people? And if He permits Jews to suffer as they do, then He deserves to be hated, not loved. It was easier for this man to live with the view that there is no God and that the Jewish people should disappear, stop bearing children, and once and for all time drop the curtain on their millennial history. All of this makes sense. It is not unreasonable. How does a rabbi make reply!

Professor Emil Fackenheim tells us that it is our moral obligation as Jews to live - to survive as a people - to make sure that Hitler will not have enjoyed a posthumous victory. His master plan to destroy us must be nullified - and by our very survival we accomplish that.

Yet, will one find it satisfying to live and suffer as a Jew only that one might prove Hitler wrong?

To all this painful soul-searching I have but one gut reaction. I love being Jewish, living a Jewish life and sharing the past, present, and future of my people, because it is the best way I know to be truly human, truly a creature in the divine image. And what I love I want my offspring to have. It is the most valuable heritage I can bequeath to them. I am grateful to my parents that they gave it to me, and I pray that my loved ones will feel that way about me, precisely because I did for them what my parents did for me.

What is more, my parents did not feel that they created this wonderful life and literature which mean so much to me. They received it from their forebears and their forebears from God. So I am grateful to God who made all of it possible. True, all of us have paid, and continue to pay, a high price for the treasure. But what great treasure does not require vigilance and sacrifice that it may

continue to be ours! Is not the cherished democracy of the west being lost because the west has lost its will to defend it and would rather appease, accommodate, even surrender, than fight for ideals!

A new year is about to dawn. The outlook for Jews and for Israel is no better now than it was a year ago. We shall pray for better, but conditions may even get worse. Nonetheless on the High Holy Days I shall be obsessed by one thought - how wonderful it is to be a Jew, whose spiritual significance and grandeur are without peers in the life or experience of any other people, whose liturgy is incomparable in its poetic imagery and philosophical insights, and whose intensity exalts me above the mundane preoccupations of daily life and gives me a glimpse of heavenly bliss! What a thrill to be a Jew on the High Holy Days and with my family to ponder what did I do that I should not have done and what did I fail to do that I should have done. And in prayer, charity, and penitence, to make the coming year a more meaningful year than the one that has passed.

Of course the new year may bring problems, new crises, new defeats. Yet all human beings have problems, crises, defeats. Only vegetables are without problems. But for my problems I have the blessing of being Jewish, living a Jewish life, and beholding every problem from a Jewish perspective. True, because I am Jewish, I may also have more problems than others. Yet I need to be Jewish to fulfill the highest dimension of my humanity. And thus I choose to live; and want other Jews to live. I want them to bring more Jewish children into this world to be blessed with a Jewish existence. And ultimately I hope all the world will understand this and perhaps seek to enjoy what I already have.

Thus I face 5736 - but not without praying for peace for all mankind and especially our beleaguered Israel.