

*Judaism: A Social Religion*

In recent years I have heard an ever increasing number of Jews refer to our current festival as the “Jewish Easter” . Perhaps this new title for the holiday is born of the inability of our American co-religionists to remember the simple words Pesach or Passover. Or perhaps it is due to the remarkable perennial coincidence of the Christian observance with our own. This year, for example, our eight-day celebration coincides exactly with the interval between Palm Sunday and Easter, and that may prompt many of our people to seek to make themselves more readily understood to their non-Jewish friends by the use of Christian, rather than Jewish, terminology.

However, I cannot tell you how the phrase “Jewish Easter” would have offended the sensibilities of our ancestors. It would truly have grated against their ears to learn that the more ancient Jewish festival must be explained in terms of a later non-Jewish one - which seldom spelled anything but grief for them. I, too, find myself irritated by the phrase. But not so much for sentimental, as for intellectual, reasons. To me the association of Passover with Easter is an indication not only of Jewish inability to remember the names Pesach or Passover, but also of Jewish ignorance of the fact that the philosophies underlying the two holidays are antithetical as day and night. The significance of Easter is almost a contradiction of the significance of Passover. And for Jews to ignore the difference is to be oblivious of the unique genius of our faith and its eternal meaningfulness for humanity.

Permit me to explain. In the study of religions one frequently finds it advantageous to distinguish between what may be called private religion and social religion. Some religions are principally concerned with the individual man as an individual. They seek to furnish a way of attaining personal salvation. They seek to pro-

vide the means for assuring the immortality of the individual's soul. That is their principal goal. That is why I call these religions private religions. They may be the religions of millions of people but their primary concern is with the souls of individuals as individuals. There are, on the other hand, religions whose primary concern is with the group, with society as a whole, with humanity at large - not with isolated human beings - but rather with human beings organized into families, communities, nations. Private religions mainly ask, "What must a man do to make his peace with God that he may enjoy life everlasting?" Social religions mainly ask, "What shall man do in his relations with his fellow-man that God's Kingdom may exist on earth as it does in heaven?"

Now, Judaism is basically a social religion. It is more concerned with man's relationships to his fellow-man than with man's relationships to God. The principal aim of the Mitzvos we perform is to make us better members of the family, community or nation of which we are a part. Personal immortality is only of secondary importance. Christianity took over from Judaism some of this spirit but from the Greeks, the founders of Christianity took over the idea of personal salvation and made the yearning for immortality the central feature of their faith. In that way they made their religion more a private religion than a social religion. And while Passover is the holiday par excellence to symbolize Judaism's concern with the social importance of religion, Easter is Christianity's holiday to symbolize its preoccupation with the salvation of the individual. Easter is Greek in its significance - not Jewish. That it usually occurs so close to Passover is only because the alleged founder of the new faith was supposed to have been crucified a few days after Passover. But ideologically speaking, Easter has nothing to do with Passover. Nay, it is almost a contradiction of the Passover. For what person familiar with the Passover can overlook the fact that it is the greatest stimulus we have in the pattern of our religious life to evoke strong family and community ties, a moving regard for human suffering, and a passion for the liberation of the oppressed? Easter, on the other hand, is the holiday dedicated not to humanity at all - but rather to the quest of every individual man for either life everlasting or resurrection after death.

Think of the Passover. You can hardly visualize celebrating it alone. When God first commanded Jews to observe it, Jews were told to unite with the members of their families and their neighbors and together make the Paschal offering.

*Every man must take a lamb for each extended family... and if the household is too small for a lamb, then he and a close neighbor shall take a lamb together.*

*Exodus 12:3-4*

It was to be a feast for groups - rather than individuals. And from that there did spring the historic regard of Jews that no Jew - no matter how poor - shall be without a feast on this holy day.

Furthermore, because we were once slaves and God liberated us, we were never to forget the oppressed, we were to love the stranger, and do justice unto the exploited. The story of our bondage in Egypt, and our exodus therefrom, became the focal point of all Judaism. Freedom and justice became our slogans, and these are values for group existence, and not values for isolated individuals.

It would take hours to point out how extensive and penetrating is the significance of Passover for better group relations, for firmer family ties, for higher social, economic and political standards. All I ask you to remember is that this is the essence of Judaism, as it is the essence of Passover. Our religion starts with the family - not with the individual. Its very conception, its birth, is in a company of people - not with individuals in isolation. And this is the very opposite of Christianity's principal concern, and the very opposite of the meaning of the Easter. And that is why I cannot think of a Jewish Easter. We have no such thing as a holiday concerned with the hermit craving the peace of God and life everlasting for himself. And this, our sages also intended to express in their comment that Torah matters cannot be upheld individually. (Tal. B. Taanis 7a)

I call this to your attention this morning not because I want to recommend the avoidance of the phrase "Jewish Easter". As a matter of fact, I do not know whether many of our own members thus offend. It is rather to help you understand the practical significance of the distinction I have drawn between Passover and Easter.

First let me give you a simple illustration. There is a lawsuit pending at the moment which is attracting much attention. An American father is trying to get his children out of a Catholic orphanage to take them with him to Russia. The Church has refused, and is still refusing to return the children. From a Christian point of view, the argument of the Church is a good one. The Church asserts that only through Catholicism will the souls of these children be saved. How then can it normally give the children to a father who will take them to a godless country where their souls will be damned! That these children will be deprived of family ties, of the attention of their own father, matters not. That the father will suffer untold anguish because of his separation from his children is also of no consequence. That the Church is offending against every principle of social religion by destroying a family unit does not matter. It must worry about the children's souls.

This case may be exceptional. But in Jewish history it is not exceptional. It happened before - the famous Mortara case - when a Jewish child was practically abducted from his family, and baptized at the request of his maid. The child was never returned to his family though in fact nations protested. The child subsequently became a priest and a missionary to Jews. But even today after six million of our co-religionists perished at the hands of the Nazi beasts, it is estimated that at least ten thousand Jewish children in Europe are still in convents and monasteries and despite the claims of relatives the Church refuses to surrender them. After all, the Church is saving their souls by keeping them loyal to Catholicism and who cares that instead of having the affection of an uncle or aunt or cousin, or the memory of ancestors who are their real forbears, they have instead the mystical union of the Church! A Church concerned principally with salvation takes such an attitude. Judaism, however, could never take such an attitude.

Or take another practical illustration which happens often. The Church will marry two people unto each other even if only one is a Catholic. Protestant clergy will marry two people to each other if only one is a Protestant. And sometimes our Jewish children come to the Rabbis and say, "Why won't a Rabbi marry two people unto each other unless both are Jewish? A Rabbi would marry

a Democrat to a Republican, or a Liberal to a Conservative. And why can't one's faith be like one's politics? Each member of the marriage can believe as he or she chooses, and why insist on Jews marrying only Jews?" The answer is again clear. If religion is a matter of personal salvation, then it matters not who one marries. One's religion is like one's politics - a private matter. But if religion is social, and closely tied in with a family, and a home, then how can you call the family a Jewish family unless both spouses are Jewish - unless the heads of the household stand for the same thing. We will not make religion a matter of personal salvation. Our religion only has meaning insofar as it has meaning for a social unit - a family, or a people. And mixed marriages destroy the social significance of Judaism. They mean that one or two individuals in the family may be Jewish but the family as a whole cannot be called Jewish. And if the family is not Jewish then Judaism can have no significance for it, and we will not give it a false Jewish character, by permitting a Rabbi to solemnize a mixed marriage. Let them become man and wife by act of law - or even by act of nature. But our marriage ceremony is to give their togetherness a Jewish character and that Jewish character a mixed marriage cannot possibly have.

But that is not all. I call to your attention the difference between the private character of Christianity and the social character of Judaism because there are times when it is important to caution our people. I believe no less than anyone I know in the importance of respecting every man's faith and permitting everyone the greatest possible freedom of worship. I believe no less than anyone I know that we all worship one God and that all humanity are brothers unto each other. I believe also that it is vital that we stress the ideals and the values that all religions have in common. But sometimes we stress our agreement with Christians so much that our children wonder why there must be differences at all. And for that reason I must just as often stress why I feel that all religions are not alike and particularly why I prefer Judaism - as a social religion - to other religions that, are rather private religions. I will defend every man's right to believe as he does - provided he does no harm to anyone. But at the same time I want to dispel the notion that one religion is as good as another. If they were all the

same, why should we so struggle to maintain our own in the face of so much hatred and hostility? That is why I must constantly affirm that Judaism has a vital message which eludes other religions. And that is why I choose to be what I am, because I regard our message as one that humanity requires now more than ever. And that is why I thank God for Passover and its reminder to me of the social character of my faith. That is why I thank God for Passover - in this season when hundreds of millions of people have chosen to alter its emphasis and substitute a less significant one. That is why I thank God for the Seder and its reminder of the unique nature of Judaism - its concern for the social unit, the family, the community, the nation. And I pray that all the world may yet come to appreciate why a social religion is so much more to be preferred than a private one. Of this the Seder makes us mindful and to this end let us dedicate ourselves as Jews forever.