

May 3, 1973

*Price of Exposure:*

In all times, Jews have been exposed to rival cultures and generation gaps

The most important theme of the Passover Festival is the Exodus from Egypt. However, there is another theme which receives almost as much attention, and that is our ultimate redemption in the Messianic era. Indeed, it is the opinion of many of our sages that the first half of the seder service is devoted to our commemoration of the liberation from bondage in the days of Pharaoh while the second half is devoted to our anticipation of a glorious future in a world that is completely just because of the advent of Elijah and the Messiah, son of David.

Even before we celebrate Passover - on the Sabbath preceding - we dedicate our thoughts to the perfect world and "that great and awesome day" of which the Prophet Malachi did speak. (*Malachi* 3:23-24) However, one may ask, What are the hallmarks of that great day? How will one recognize it? How will one know that it is nigh?

According to the Prophet Malachi we will know it is here when we see the hearts of parents and the hearts of children at one, reconciled unto each other, and beating, so to speak, with one beat. Does this not mean that the problem of the generation gap must be much older than the twentieth century and that as far back as the days of the Prophet Malachi he and his contemporaries recognized that a symptom of the unrest of the world and the evil which the Messiah is expected to eliminate is the alienation between one generation and another?

Malachi prophesied more than two thousand years ago. Yet he gave us one credential by which we might recognize the advent of the Messiah and that is the reconciliation of young and old and their pursuit together of that justice which the Messiah is to guarantee.

This thought held my attention even as I participated in the seder service. So much consideration is given to the different kinds of sons that parents have. The text in which we describe the wise son and the wicked son, the simpleton and the retardate, is also thousands of years old. It is based upon older verses in the Bible but the text itself is found in the earliest Tanaitic literature which is at least two thousand years old. There are versions of the text in the Babylonian and in the Palestinian Talmuds.

Thus, it is apparent that Jewish parents had to cope with different kinds of children thousands of years ago and some of these children were wise, cooperative, identified with their parents' hopes and aspirations, while other children were alienated, resentful and anxious to break away.

A very distinguished philosopher of law once spent many years studying Indians and he came to the conclusion that we overrate primitive society when we assume that in primitive societies there was no generation gap. He pointed out that in every society there always were the drifters and the drivers. There were those who drifted along with the stream. They were the conformists. They did what their parents expected them to do. However, there also were the drivers, the pushers, the dissidents, the non-conformists. This phenomenon is thus true not only of modern society but of all societies in the history of man. The generation gap that so troubles modern man, and especially modern Jews, is a phenomenon of ancient vintage and perhaps should not be as surprising as it is.

Yet if Jews spoke of it so long ago and recognized it so early in human history, it must be because Jewish society had a heavy dose of the malady. And it may be that Jews could have been expected to have more of it than others. It was in the nature of Jewish society that Jews almost always had to live in more than one civilization at the same time.

Ancient Jewish civilization was close to Egyptian civilization and the civilization of Mesopotamia. Jews had contacts with the Persians, the Greeks, and the Romans. Jews lived side by side with Christians and with Moslems. And whenever a people live close to other peoples and other civilizations and are in constant communication with each other, there will inevitably be centripetal and centrifugal forces that will prompt some to attach themselves tightly unto their own people while others are drawn away.

One might almost say that it is a price one pays when one is Jewish. One is always raising one's children in an environment which will expose them to strong forces that seek to pull them away from their people at the same time that their people create strong forces to keep them attached and belonging. And the results speak for themselves. At one and the same time we Jews have the strongest sense of belonging to each other, and simultaneously we sustain the greatest losses in alienation, assimilation, and inter marriage.

Perhaps because of our millennial history we became aware of this much earlier than other peoples and it was because of this that our sages spoke of it on Passover. Similarly it was because of this that the Prophet Malachi dreamed of a perfect world in which parents and children would be totally reconciled unto each other without the pain and anguish that is associated with the loss of loved ones to whom one has given the breath of life and whose thanklessness "is sharper than a serpent's tooth."

It ought to be helpful to parents who have suffered the alienation of their children to know that this is a price they are paying for being Jewish. However, there is also a very practical consideration with which the Jewish community must reckon. There are small groups of Jews who because they are aware of this phenomenon try their best to live in isolation and seal themselves off from the rest of the world. Indeed these are also the Jews who have large families and even if they were to sustain a loss or two, the percentage of alienated children among them would still be very small.

On the other hand, modern Jews who live in more than one civilization at the same time have small families and when they sustain a loss that loss represents a very large percentage of the total of their offspring, sometimes a third, half, or even more.

For that reason those who are responsible for the survival of the Jewish community must do two things. No matter what their personal philosophies are, they must do everything they possibly can to help preserve those Jewish families that want to be isolated. It may not be a philosophy which we ourselves can embrace. However, those Jews will in a way assure Jewish survival. Their birthrate is high and their percentage of losses is small.

At the same time, however, many of us feel that it is the hallmark of the greatness of the Jew that he has always lived in many civilizations at the same time and only in that way could be a light unto the nations, and we must do everything in our power to understand the risks that we are incurring, even as we try to reduce the number of our losses.

Of course a fine Jewish education is one of the best ways to insure that the losses will not be overwhelmingly great. But even a good Jewish education is no guarantee against alienation. Some of the most famous enemies of the Jewish people have come from good Jewish backgrounds and even graduates of yeshivas are to be found among those who are abandoning Judaism for other faiths and cults.

However, in addition to Jewish education we must give more attention to meaningful Jewish experiences and Jewish activism so that the Jewish youth whom we train to live in more than one civilization at the same time may realize that while contact with other groups can be enriching emotionally and intellectually, yet their own birthright and heritage can be most meaningful to them and help them to achieve the most gratifying kind of life available to any human being on the face of the earth.

Certainly the Passover festival must of necessity impress parents with the grave nature of their responsibility. The more I live the more convinced I become that there are no easy answers any more than there is an easy road to human salvation. However, the greater the challenge the greater is the personal gratification when one has coped with the challenge.

One cannot promise Jewish parents in the modern age happiness and nachas. One can only say unto them that if they choose to be parents, let them prove themselves equal to the great responsibility they have assumed.