

“The Yoke of the Law”

In the history of religion it often occurs that what superficially appears to be a minor difference of opinion becomes the basis for a schism of major importance. We Jews, for example, find it difficult to understand how Protestant denominations split so often on what appears to be minor differences in doctrine, while Christians find it difficult to understand how the problem of wearing a hat at Jewish religious services could precipitate a break between Orthodoxy and Reform. Yet so it was.

We read that the Jews went forth from Egypt. “In triumph” [literally, “with upraised arms”]. (*Exodus* 14:8) These words are translated by Unkelas, the great translator of antiquity, as meaning, with uncovered heads. Jews thus entered upon their freedom, by exposing their hair to the sun. In ancient times a slave covered his head while a free man did not. Therefore, to symbolize their freedom, Jews did the customary thing. They removed their headgear which was the badge of bondage. In subsequent years, however, they undertook once again to cover their heads as a sign of their submission to the will of God. They cherished freedom. Yet for their freedom to have direction, they accepted the yoke of the Law. And their acceptance of the Law they symbolized by covering their heads. As Rashi said, “Cover your head that you may thereby indicate your fear of Heaven.” (Tal. B. Shabbos 156b)

However, with the advent of the Reform movement it was inevitable that the hat become an issue. Most Reform Jews were motivated by the fact that they wanted to do what Christians did. But scholars among them - and scholars there were - must have understood, that since the Reform Movement was rejecting the Law and the pattern of Jewish observance, it was only logical that they reject the practice of covering their heads, which symbolized ac-

ceptance of the Law. That explains how a seemingly trivial matter became so important. The hat became the symbol of the Law. Wearing it, meant acceptance of the Law. Not wearing it meant rejection of the Law.

I call this to your attention, not because we have any group in our Congregation agitating for the removal of hats. Not at all. On the other hand, so many Jews feel uncomfortable without the hat even in Reform synagogues, that most Reform synagogues now make the wearing of the hat optional. In only a few die-hard Reform congregations is the covered head forbidden. However, while the wearing of the hat is hardly an issue any more, the question of the acceptance of the Law is very much an issue. And it is high time that we came to grips with the problem.

Reform Judaism began with the view that what is important in Judaism is its ethical and spiritual message. The observances, it considered of little or no consequence. A distinction was made between Prophetic Judaism and Rabbinic Judaism. The former was cherished because it involved the ideals of peace and brotherhood and justice. But Reform Judaism was intolerant of the methods of the Rabbis to fulfill these ideals. Reform Judaism was intolerant of the legalists who developed the elaborate hermeneutics of the Halachah, the intellectual apparatus of Jewish Law. Alas, they forgot that they had discovered nothing new. They forgot that their view was precisely that of Paul, the first Christian, who also established a new religion. Paul wanted to make the ideals of our prophets acceptable to the pagans of the Greek and Roman world; and to accomplish this end, he too rejected the Law. And Reform Judaism did the same thing. But what was the result? Intelligent Jews could not long be duped, and soon they began to recognize, that if there was little or no difference between Christianity and Reform Judaism, intermarriage and assimilation could not be objectionable.

The same thing happened in America; and I remember how years ago, Reform Rabbis wrote and preached and lectured constantly, upon the differences between Reform Judaism and Unitarian Christianity, so similar were they that it became necessary to reiterate and reemphasize the differences. The arguments were not too convincing and intermarriage and assimilation continued

to be so rampant that the leading Reform Rabbis in America today want to re-accept the Law. Not the complete Law perhaps, not the whole of the Shulchan Aruch, but some of it as revised by them. They want to create their own Law, a new Law, but they are at least giving up the idea of concentrating on Prophetic Judaism alone. They want Rabbinic Judaism too, some of it, at least, even if not all of it. And that is why there is the possibility that America, instead of having three groups - Orthodox, Conservative and Reform, may some day have only two. The left wing conservatives may merge with the reform group, while the right wing conservatives will join with the orthodox and constitute one united front of traditionalists. Yet what is becoming increasingly apparent is that all Jews, traditionalists and non-traditionalists, will once and for all recognize that Judaism without Law is not Judaism at all. It is Christianity. The unique character of Judaism will ever be that it calls for Law.

Now, friends, you may rightfully ask, "Why does Judaism so insist upon Law as a part of the religious way of life? Why do we so emphasize the Law when spirituality should be a matter of the spirit?" And to this I answer most emphatically, "You cannot make men spiritual by simply preaching to them about high ideals and eternal values. How much brotherhood does the world now have after two thousand years of preaching about the brotherhood of man?"

Let us look at the American scene. When will Whites and Negroes even have the right to attend the same Christian church down south? When will they sit as brothers, even in pews, to listen to the Sermon on the Mount? Never, because preachers will have preached a million sermons on equality, but rather when a Congress will have passed Civil Rights legislation, making any overt act of discrimination punishable by law.

When will Jews enjoy equality in admission to college or in employment opportunities? Not after a hundred thousand Easters will have been celebrated with sermons on goodwill, but rather after one effective Fair Employment Practices Act or one effective Fair Educational Practices Act will have been passed.

When will scoundrels stop their scurrilous attacks on innocent people, even in the highest legislature of the nation? Not after they

have attended a thousand communion masses, but after one law will have been passed making legislators responsible for their malicious attacks on innocent victims. One law would silence where everything else has failed.

We could talk forever in generalities about Jewish ideals, or more specifically about Jewish consciousness and avail naught, unless we follow the Law to achieve our goals. We could talk to children forever about freedom, but nothing makes them as conscious of slavery and freedom, as laws with respect to Matzoh and Moror, and the observance of other Passover rituals prescribed by Jewish law. With regard to the equitable treatment and ultimate emancipation of slaves our sages did not rely on exhortations alone. Rather did they develop Hilchos Avodim, laws pertaining to slaves - and these laws were so effective, that a Rabbi once expressed himself to the effect that the Law so protects slaves, that it is better to be a Jewish slave than a Jewish master. And that is why I love law, and particularly Jewish law. That is why I love the yoke of the Law. It is hardly a yoke at all. It is rather the one truly effective way we have of translating ideals into realities. And that is why I am impatient with talk about freedom and brotherhood. I want action, legal action, legislation to achieve the desired goals. That is the spirit of Judaism and its method. That is the spirit of the Halachah. May God help us to appreciate this unique approach of our faith, to cherish it and to preserve it. For, alas, the world still needs it. May God help us to study and apply Halachah until the Messiah doth come and with him the age of everlasting justice and freedom.