

Earl Raab

September 4, 1979

American Jewish Are Not Bashful

There is a new law in California which Jewish parents should know about. It prevents the public schools from penalizing Jewish children in any way for being absent on the High Holy Days.

It is also another footnote on the activism of the American Jewish community in its own defense, which dates back over a hundred years:

A little over a year ago, some Jewish parents in Marin complained at a meeting of the Marin Jewish Community Relations Committee, that their children were being given a hard time about their religious absences. They were not only marked as "unexcused absences," but they were being treated in that spirit. Tests were being given on those days, which they were not allowed to make up, and so forth.

In response to the Marin parents, the JCRC went to the legislature, and helped to draw up a remedial bill. It was backed by the Jewish Public Affairs Committee of California, a composite of all the organized Jewish communities in California. The law was passed this year. It provides that there are personal reasons for absence, including religious reasons, which the schools must respect. Thus, for example, students are entitled to make up any tests or lessons which have to be given on those days.

The new law has been sent to all administrators and principals in this area by the JCRC. But Jewish parents should also be alerted to their children's rights under this law, in case there is the attempt to impose any disability.

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Unlike many European Jewish communities, the American Jewish community has not typically been bashful about openly demanding treatment as first class citizens. Back in 1850, the U.S. signed a commercial treaty with Switzerland, which said that all American citizens were to be admitted equally to Switzerland, except where such admission conflicted with the law of some canton. And there were Swiss cantons whose law excluded Jews from settling or even visiting. ~~From a state of virtually no organization,~~ The Jews of America held protest meetings all over the country. Under the pressure, the President finally agreed to remedy the situation, ~~which eventually happened.~~

Then, in 1958, there was the famous "Mortara Case." Edgar Mortara, six year old son of Jewish parents living in Bologna, Italy, was kidnapped by Papal Guards to be raised as a Catholic. Again, protest meetings were held by Jews all over the country.

The largest protest meeting in the country took place in San Francisco, on January 15, 1859. The Jewish community, joined by others sent a public message to the U.S. government "to utilize its moral power and to cooperate with European powers in endeavors to suppress religious intolerance and persecution, such as exhibits itself in the Mortara case."

Despite the public efforts, the U.S. government declined to get involved with the Vatican in the case of Mortara, who later became a priest. The American Jews decided that they not only had to cry out publicly, but also had to organize with

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more unity for such a purpose. So, there was formed the Board of Delegates of American Israelites.

The Board of Delegates proceeded to bring public pressure on the American government whenever a bona fide case of Jewish disadvantage warranted it. ~~With such action by the Jewish community, the Board of Delegates~~ ^{They} got the U.S. government to take action in 1863 on behalf of persecuted Jews in Tangiers; and persuaded the government to appoint Benjamin Peixotto as American Consul in Rumania to help the ~~condition~~ of Jews ~~in that area~~.

The Board of Delegates also successfully protested an act of Congress in 1861 which said that any chaplain in the Armed forces must be "a regular ordained minister of some Christian denomination." And it forced an immediate revocation of General Grant's order expelling all Jews from certain Southern states. It also publicly fought and won against various Christian groups who, in 1864, tried to get Congress to recognize Christianity as the state religion.

It is thus an old and honored tradition: while there may be more or less effective ways of doing it, American Jews won't tip-toe around in pursuit of their rights.

(Syndicated by the San Francisco Jewish Bulletin)