

A PECULIAR CONTRADICTION

We have just learned that about half of the contributors to the Jewish Welfare Federation in San Francisco do not belong to a synagogue.

"Being religious" or not is indeed a private matter. About a quarter of the Federation contributors say that they are "non-religious," and never attend a synagogue. That's their prerogative and another subject. But there is a curious contradiction in the fact that those people contribute to the Federation and not to a synagogue.

Their reason for giving to the one and not to the other usually goes like this: "I'm just not a religious fellow -- but I contribute to the Federation because I'm interested in the survival of Israel and of Jewry."

They are right about the fact that Israel and Jewry would have a slim chance of survival without the institutions supported by the Federation. But the chances are *nil* that Israel or Jewry could survive without the synagogue.

The synagogue was a creation of survival in the first place. It developed in Jewish life around the time of the Babylonian exile. Houses of prayer were set up for the first time in places far from the Temple, for the public reading and interpretation of the scriptures. It is safe to say that in that period, and in the periods of dispersion which followed, the survival of Jewry and of Judaism centered around the institution of the synagogue.

That is why the English scholar, Robert Herford, wrote: "The religion of the Torah learned to do without the Temple, but it never dreamed of doing without the synagogue ... The essence of the synagogue is congregational worship and edification, conducted by the congregation through their own members, not by priests on their behalf ... To have created the synagogue is perhaps the greatest practical achievement of the Jews in all their history."

The practical role of the synagogue for Jewish survival, whether in Israel or in America, is as great today as it was in the time of Ezra the Scribe. It was always the synagogue through which the Jewish people became religiously literate. You can talk all you want about "Jewish education," but none of the schools or institutes or seminars will mean anything without the educational fount, the synagogue.

There is, of course, another little matter. *Why* do we want Jewry, or Israel to survive? If it's just a matter of physical survival, there has usually been a better solution. In most times and in most places, Jews have had the option to become non-Jews. Many took that option, and their descendants are not now subjects for oppression. Even Hitler had generational limits on his search for Jewish ancestry.

But most Jews have stiff-neckedly wanted to survive *as Jews*. Why do those who say that they are "not particularly religious" want Jewish survival? Some say they want to see the continuation of Jewish "ethnic life."

That's their prerogative, too. The only problem is that history doesn't record any case of such an ethnic way of life surviving for many generations, when detached from its source. There is no reason why American Jewry should escape that iron law. And few doubt that Israel would become just "another Levantine nation" if cut off from its religious source.

Of course, that doesn't require all Jews to become "religious." It never did. But it does suggest that, as a practical matter, all Jews should recognize the ultimate religious source of whatever they like about being Jews. And, as a practical matter, that means the synagogue.

Earl Raab

"A Peculiar Contradiction"

page 3

So, all other considerations aside, it just doesn't make any sense for those interested in Jewish survival to support the Federation without supporting the synagogue, however "non-religious" they may be. But that's what half of us have been doing.

(Syndicated by the San Francisco Jewish Bulletin)