

Guests In America?

It is still not clear whether Jews are tolerated guests in this country — or an integral part of it. We may find out shortly. Meanwhile, we have been trying to move away from guest-status, not by assimilating but by clarifying the nature of the American society.

Take the matter of employment discrimination. Once, when cases of anti-Jewish discrimination came to light, Jewish agencies went to the offending employer and argued, cajoled, threatened publicly. Sometimes it worked, but one often got the feeling that the employer was then doing us a big favor.



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And that was about where it stood as little as a quarter century ago. A survey of job orders placed at the California Employment service in 1950 revealed that about 25 percent of California's employers openly said that they would not hire Jews for white-collar jobs, no matter how well qualified they were.

Then came the civil rights battle. The San Francisco JCRC was the hub of the coalition which fought for fair employment laws, first in San Francisco, then in the state. As an organized Jewish community, we were in it because, as Jews, we needed the kind of society where tolerance was superseded by natural right.

No longer do 25 percent of California's employers refuse to hire Jews. And, where they do, we no longer have to go to them as special-pleading Jewish "guests." A government agency goes to them on behalf of the whole society.

New situations develop. Affirmative action laws are now being used to advance Jewish employment in corporation "executive suites." But the organized Jewish community was involved this year in amending two pieces of state legislation on affirmative action, in order to strengthen explicit language prohibiting any kind of discrimination. Because of such language in such laws, a judge was able to rule last week that the University of California at Davis could not discriminate against individual whites because of color.

Or take those Nazis in San Francisco. No one defends the Nazis' right to free speech; but we defend the principle of free speech for everyone, as a prime matter of Jewish self-defense. But in the ensuing open battle for the minds of men, we depend better on society's official commitment, than on self-pleading. For example, at the stimulation of the JCRC, the San Francisco public school system is this year instituting the most comprehensive anti-Nazi educational program in which it has ever engaged. It is a program mounted on behalf of our society, not on behalf of the Jews.

Last week, a teacher (Jewish) invited some Nazis into the classroom to speak. The school district countermanded the invitation — based on a state law prohibiting defamatory instruction in the classroom. The classroom is an official educational forum as distinct from the street-corner. The JCRC had been involved in passing that state law. It is now society's rule, not a special plea. And a footnote on those Nazi posters which a few people have been plastering on utility poles around town: since the Nazis do not have (and will not get) permission to place their material on official property, the JCRC has arranged for the Public Works Department to pull down these posters when they are notified. It is a job for society.

In brief, the thrust has been for an American society in which Jews can remain a distinct group, as they must, while being full citizens rather than tolerated guests. The coming months and years may put an unusual strain on that concept. Hopefully, the work that we have done will help society stand the strain.

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Candid Comments