

ON BEING JEWISH

"If you remove the chains of oppression," read Sister Cathryn de Back, "if you make sacrifices for the hungry, and satisfy the needs of the afflicted; then shall your light shine in the darkness."

A Catholic nun was reading the words of the Jewish prophet Isaiah to a large congregation in San Francisco's Calvary Presbyterian Church. It happened last week, on Thanksgiving eve.

It was an interfaith service with an interfaith congregation for an interfaith cause: the San Francisco Emergency Food Box. For several years, this fund has filled an important religious need in this community, providing short-term aid for those in immediate need of food. It serves those who fall between the cracks of the soup kitchens and the slow-moving welfare agencies.

The Council of Churches started it; the Catholics and Jews have joined in. After all, there is no more pressing social imperative for those religions which are based on Judaism. "If your brother become poor," it is commanded in Leviticus, "uphold him." Jewish identity and continuity lose much point, if that commandment is swept under the rug.

The Thanksgiving service at the Calvary Presbyterian Church, where much food and food money were collected, had a secondary significance. In San Francisco, there is a long-standing interfaith tradition. The San Francisco Conference on Religion, Race and Social Concerns is the oldest continuing operation of its kind in the nation. The Archdiocese, the Council of Churches, the Board of Rabbis and the JCRC have joined in many common endeavors, including the fight for fair employment and fair housing laws, and the battle against local expressions of Nazism.

There has not been unanimity on all public policy matters, which should not be surprising. On many of today's complex public issues, the common religious impulse is necessarily bent in different directions by different historical and political experiences. Jews have been most disturbed by actions of Christian bodies which have seemed inimical to Israel. The Pope has received Arafat; the National Council of Churches has passed unfriendly resolutions about Israel.

Nevertheless, when the UN passed its "Zionism-is-racism" resolution, the San Francisco leaders of the Protestant and Catholic churches spoke strongly for Israel at a rally in Union Square. And many of them have acted on Israel's behalf many times since. A continuing discussion is taking place on that subject in San Francisco; an all-day conference among Catholic, Protestant and Jewish leaders will soon be held here. We need not stand alone, and we will fail if we try to.

So it is true that general interfaith cooperation was one aspect of the Thanksgiving event at Calvary Presbyterian Church. Cantor Portnoy's Hashkivenu and Ose Shalom, Rabbi Rosove's Shema and V'Ahavta, Rabbi Sparer's reading of Psalm 24, were an integral part of the service along with Catholic and Protestant clergy -- and all participants marched out to the strains of Adon Olom. But the primary purpose of the gathering stood on its own, and was expressed most poignantly in the joint reading of Isaiah by Rita Semel and Sister Cathryn: "Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and to bring the homeless poor into your house?"

When there are hungry people in our city, it must simply be an imperative of our common religious heritage -- and of our Jewish heritage independently -- to share our food, if we are to call ourselves religious, if we are to call ourselves Jews.

For a start, if you want to make a contribution of food or food money to the Emergency Food Box, get in touch with the Board of Rabbis or the JCRC.