

WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED?

Next Thursday night at Temple Emanu-El, thirty-six years after the liberation of the Nazi death camps, San Francisco Jews will come together to remember the victims. What have we learned?

Certainly we have learned never to take anti-semitism lightly, never to be lulled into complacency. Certainly we have learned that it is necessary to be open and aggressive in our fight against anti-semitism, never to hang back. Certainly we have learned that we cannot afford a weak response.

One weak response would be to underestimate the extent of the danger. A Jewish agency reports that several hundred anti-semitic episodes came to its attention last year. But there were many more that did not come to its attention. Another weak response would be to miscalculate the *nature* of the danger. We have learned from Jewish history that our enemies can change. A half century ago, only a few people imagined that the Soviet Union would one day become, as it now has, the world's chief producer of anti-semitic material. And in this immediate period, the PLO, backed by the Soviet Union, most directly threatens the survival of several million Jews. If we take that potential Holocaust lightly, then we have learned nothing.

It would also be a weak response to miscalculate the nature of the danger in the United States. *Fewer* Americans are anti-semitic than ever before. Last week Gallup reported that in 1952 about 34 per cent of Americans thought that Jews were trying to get too much power in this country; now only about 12 per cent believe that. In 1937, only 2 out of 5 Americans said they would vote for a Jewish presidential candidate; now 4 out of 5 Americans say they would. In general, the survey reports "a steady and marked decline in the number of persons who have feelings of animosity towards Jews." The percentage of Americans who are "*highly* favorable" towards Jews has risen to 40 per cent (from 33 per cent in 1975) as compared with two per cent who say they are highly unfavorable.

But attitudes are reversible, and certainly we have learned that whether people like us or not is less important than the strength of the laws and institutions which protect us. We have learned that a weak response is to pass laws which *pretend* to do something and don't. A pre-Nazi German state, for example, enforced a law to ban Nazi uniforms, but the Nazis multiplied there anyway. If we have learned anything, we will courageously defend those constitutional laws of political and religious freedom which pre-Nazi Germany did *not* have, and which protect us most.

And since the number of anti-semitic episodes is high and the appearances of the KKK dramatic, it has been suggested that while there are fewer anti-semites, the general anarchic climate gives license to those who are prone to anti-semitism. This requires *strong* action by the Jewish community -- in laws, law enforcement, and education -- to fight that climate of violence and license and the conditions which create it.

And it is a *weak* response for the Jews to try to make this fight alone, on grounds that nobody else cares. There are people who care, partly because they have become convinced that if we're in the soup, they're in the soup. In October, 1943, a small and occupied nation of Danes heroically rose up to smuggle its Jewish community to safety. The Jews of Palestine then called it "one of the few rays of light in the moral darkness." But as Leni Yahil, the Israeli historian of that episode, points out: "The Danes regarded their deeds as not in the least extraordinary or worthy of praise or admiration. In their opinion, they merely did the natural and necessary, and never for a moment considered the possibility of abandoning the Jews to their fate."

It is in the process of remembering what we have learned, that this Jewish community will make a symbolic presentation to Danish representatives at the Yom HaShoa observance next Thursday night. But the chief purpose of that Yom HaShoa observance, programmed by survivors, is to remember the martyrs. To remember as a community, that is where our strength begins. Have we not learned that, at least? Who will not be at the Yom HaShoa observance next Thursday night?