

MUNISH SOIFER'S LETTER TO GOD

George Ellman

Memphis

The meeting over, it was moved to adjourn and the meeting stood adjourned; to be exact, the meeting sat adjourned. There were two good reasons for it: First, a storm was raging; a wind reaching a fifty-mile-an-hour velocity was driving hats, umbrellas, newspapers and other movables down Washington Avenue and it looked good for another hour at least, and the second reason, the Rev. Mr. L. J—, of the B. H. Orthodox Congregation, came in to extend the Congregation's cordial invitation to the members of the Board to attend its annual Chanukah celebration next Sunday. So there was no reason for "standing" and the meeting "sat" adjourned.

The members of the Board were glad, very glad, at having met the reverend gentleman and the reverend gentleman was happy at having met the gentlemen of the Board, as he expressed it, "Ponim-el-ponim," for the first time, and they all settled down in their seats for a social hour.

Pretty soon the office air was surcharged with the odors of 2 for 25 and 3 for 50 cents cigar smoke, mingled with a thin, bluish ribbon of smoke coming from a hand-made "Durham" tobacco cigarette.

The discussions were of various shades: The war, and after the war—what? Mexico; the Exposition; the Panama Canal; crops; cotton; wheat; the markets, etc. These topics exhausted, local questions came in for their share: The Federated; budgets; winter outlook; unemployed and the like.

Next, some specific cases that were handled and their dispositions came up for second reading as it were. Especially one certain, very difficult case, in which the spirit of appreciation on the part of the recipient was badly lacking, had been handled rather roughly by one of the members present and that gentleman wanted to know why "these people are so unappreciative!" This was delivered in a very forceful way and while not directly addressed to the Rev. Gentleman we all suspected that an answer from him was implied.

Now the Rev. Mr. J—, like every other reverend gentleman of the orthodox persua-

sion, was the possessor of that keen, fine analogical mind so pronounced in the Yeshivo Bochor, which he indeed was in his home in Russia and he took the hint. Whereupon giving two successive, long pulls to the stub of his "Durham" cigarette, inhaling the smoke and allowing it to come out through mouth and nose at the same time, said: "Well, gentlemen, I see you would like me to give you the reason and I will try to do so. You see, gentlemen, this is nothing to wonder at; 'appreciation' is very closely allied with 'harmony' and 'unity'! You cannot appreciate a person or a thing unless you are, psychologically speaking, at one with him or it. We have a true example of this law in music. For the members of the band, as well as the audience, unless there be absolute harmony, absolute unity between each one of the players and between the hearers, 'appreciation' will be out of the question, and, gentlemen, have you ever heard or seen such a thing as 'harmony' or 'unity' among Jews? Rather, would I say, that 'mistrustfulness' is among the many characteristics of our Russian Jews. You must prove to the Russian Jew your love, your brotherliness, your friendship by deed and example a dozen times before he will believe you once.

"You say it is a misfortune. Decidedly so! But, gentlemen, you must realize that we are as much the product of our training and surrounding as you are of yours. We can no more help being what we are than you can help being what you are. It is all in how we were brought up. It is all in how we lived up to the age of our manhood. We represent years of repression and persecution. Our fathers and ourselves have been ground into dust. We have been condemned to every sort of indignity; every kind of epithet has been heaped upon us. Through it all we have been taught that we are in a state of exile. The time will come, we are taught, when we will be rescued and taken back to the promised land. Everything depended upon our keeping the old customs and observances. All of which acts as a blind to our

eyes and we cannot, in the first and second generations, so quickly and readily adopt ourselves to modernism. Why, then, wonder at the lack of 'appreciation' on the part of the Russian product. Is it not rather to be wondered that, in spite of it all, the Russian Jew is still a fairly good piece of raw material which with careful and proper handling can yet be made over into a useful American article?

"And," continued the Rev. Mr. J—, "you talk about 'unappreciation,' allow me, please, to cite to you a true story which happened in my home city of O—, which will illustrate how deep-seated this trait really is in the Russian Jew, even in Russia.

"Munish Soifer (scribe) was an Onee Ve-Evion, a Kabtzan Ve-Dalphon. Munish Soifer had one wife and eight girls. The winter was a severe one and times with Munish were far from what they should have been. There were very few Kvitlach written for Chanukah, a source of, at the least, five rubles income, which paid for the fuel and potatoes up to two weeks before Purim, which ushers in the Megilah season. A half a dozen of megilath to oversee and one or two new ones to write was the regular annual harvest, which helped bringing in the Pesach. But this winter, may God have pity, not a kvital to write; not a megilah to oversee, let alone to write a new one. Even the Mezuzas seemed to be all kosher all over town and not one sold.

"It now was but one week before Yum Tov. Munish needed Shemirah Matzos; Proste Matzos; Shmaltz; a few Gens; a half a dozen of chickens; potatoes, eggs, onions, carrots, horseradish, wine, whiskey, charoses, etc., and not a kopeika in the house. It looked very gloomy to Munish and to Shprintze, his wife, who, after the frugal evening meal, sat down on the one vacant chair opposite her lord, Munish, with the everlasting 'Nu, Munish, what thinkest thou?' Thus bringing the whole issue square before Munish's mental eye.

"I am not thinking of nothing," answered Munish. 'I am sure that I would rather see myself and all of us with the feet toward the door before I shall go to the parness for Mooes Chitim. As to eating Chometz, I shall sooner commit suicide and then kill all of you, you know that!

What, then,' continued he, 'do you ask me what I think? I think if I couldn't find some eitze how to bring in the yum tov and that is all!'

"The night was very cold and dreary. The hour was late. All the girls have retired and Munish was still sitting up, with the Shulchan Aruch Yore Deah open before him, but his mind a blank, as far as the Dineh Shel Pessach were concerned, the page which he tried hard to read. He had 'Nu, Munish,' in the shape of Shprintze sitting opposite him at the other end of the table and he was wondering what to do.

"Hearst thou, Shprintze,' said he at last, 'what fell into me? I'll tell you it. Seest thou? I have prayed and prayed; I have confessed my sins and asked forgiveness for yours and the children's, life to them, and still there is no help; so that now it fell into me to write a letter to God. What do you think of this eitze, eh?'

"What should Shprintze think of such an eitze? 'Why,' said she, 'you are a yid a lamdon; a miflug and maskil. Who knows better in these matters than you? What can I say, a proste Yeddineh that I am, when you think it is right? And who can equal you in writing? I think a good brievele as you can write may help,' and forthwith the letter was written.

"Munish reminded God that He was, is and forever will be the Ribono-Shel-Olom; that He was, is and forever will be an Ov-Orachemim; that He was, is and forever will be an Oseh-Nissim, Oses U-Mofsim, winding up with the plea of the child with a contrite heart, acknowledging his own and his wife's and children's shortcomings and asking Him to cause some miracle to come to pass, even as this yum tov is the yum tov of the Asoro Nisim, so that neither Munish nor Shprintze, nor the girls, a life on them, shall have to lie with their feet toward the door or be killed.

"The letter was sealed and Munish with his own hands mailed it, that is, he flung it up into the air in front of his house and saw the air currents pick it up and carry it across the street over the roofs and it disappeared.

"The different air currents tossed the letter from one side of one street to the other side of another until it fell down in front of

Rab Shaia the Red's house on Crooked Street. Now, here is really the miracle: Shaia the Red was the richest Yehudah in O—. Rumor had it that Rab Shaia was worth shaprat alofim (980) thousand rubles. Rumor also had it that Rab Shaia was the most charitable man in O—. He has been known to shenuder for a sheeshee on an ordinary Shaboth as much as chai (18) rach (rubles). On last Yum Kippur he shenudered for maffir chai-peomim-chai rach (18 x 18) rubles. And the next morning when Rab Shaia came out in front of his house he noticed the letter, opened it, read it and sent for Munish.

"Rab Shaia was always a great admirer of Munish's writings. There was not a mezuzah, a megillah or a sefer torah in Rab Shaia's house that was not written by Munish, and it must be said in Munish's favor that there was not a soifer within a radius of a thousand verst around O—to equal him in his sheens, his lamads, his koofs or his lepaks.

"When Rab Shaia's messenger had told Munish that Rab Shaia wished to see him at his house Shprintze was there offering herself to escort Munish there. 'Because,' said she, 'du bist doch a koshere behemoh. Du bist doch a nee beh nee meh nee kokoreeko. Rab Shaia will tell you something and you wouldn't know what to answer!' And they both went.

"Munish,' said Rab Shaia, 'I see you wrote a letter to God, asking Him to help you bring in the Pesach and this morning, He, blessed be His name, sent you, through me, fifty rubles.' And Rab Shaia handed Munish fifty. Munish took the money. First he counted it on the right side, then on the left side and again on the right side, but never as much as a look did he give to Rab Shaia. Shprintze, who stood a little behind Munish, knowing what a nee beh nee meh, etc., he was, had pulled him several times by the coat tail, whispering 'Behemoh, why don't you say something?' But Munish did not. At last, after having examined the money to his own content, he turned around and without saying a word, left Rab Shaia's house. Shprintze murmured a few words of thanks and not until she caught up with Munish at the corner of the next street did she

succeed in getting his explanation for such untoward behavior.

"You need not call me a Koshereh Behemoh. Not much of a nee beh nee meh nee kokoreeko am I, either!' said Munish. 'It is you who are all this, not I. Thank him, why? You mean to say I didn't see through the whole business, eh? You mean to say he had fooled me as he fooled you, eh? He tried to make me believe that God, who is a Yodeah Machshovos; God, who knows that I have you and the eight girls to support; God, after receiving my letter, which was enough to break any one's heart, did send me a miserable fifty rubles? Is this enough for Pesach, eh? But I am not so foolish as he thinks I am. No, Shprintze! Let me tell you how it was: God sent me one hundred rubles and that fellow made a fifty on me! That's what your Rab Shaia did. I hope I shall never need write to God again, but, God, watch, if I shall, I will ask Him to send the money direct to me, not to Shaia the Red, that's what I am going to do.'"

And the meeting stood adjourned, subject to call by the president.

New York Social Workers

The Society of Jewish Social Workers of Greater New York held a meeting on Saturday evening, January 22d, at the New York Young Men's Hebrew Association. Dr. Charles S. Bernheimer presided. Mr. Joseph W. Pincus presented a plan for the formation of a Jewish Social Workers' Savings and Loan Association, to be composed of members of the Society. Shares were subscribed by a number of members.

Dr. Paul Abelson delivered an address in which he urged the importance of a knowledge of industries that are open to Jewish employees, in order that Jewish social workers shall be enabled to assist Jewish young men and women in training for occupations. Messrs. Henry J. Eckstein and J. M. Sedalicia participated in the discussion which followed.

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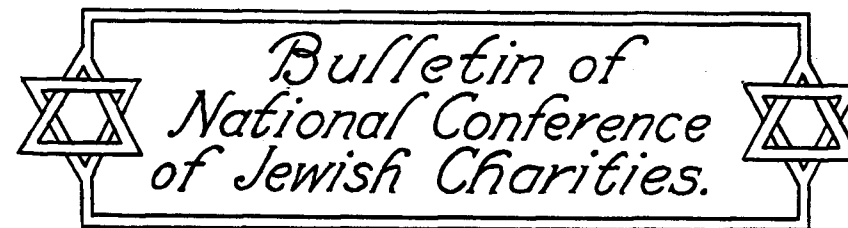
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