

Fact and Opinion

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Intra-Jewish Ecumenism— Pro and Con

An apparently accelerating trend toward intra-Jewish ecumenism is engendering increasing opposition from extremist traditionalist elements.

At the last annual convention of the Rabbinical Council of America (in April) a Conservative rabbi—the first such to be accorded the privilege in the fifty years that the Council has been in existence—addressed the assemblage. Rabbi Alexander M. Shapiro, president of the Rabbinical Assembly pleaded for an end to internecine conflict among the various branches of religious Judaism in a united response to the threat of assimilation. He asked his Orthodox listeners to intercede with Orthodox religious leaders in Israel to accord recognition to Conservatism and pressed for the oft-suggested creation of a joint *beth din*.

Rabbi Shapiro's invitation to address the convention was in reciprocation for a similar appearance at the Rabbinical Assembly's convention in March by Rabbi Louis Bernstein, president of the Rabbinical Council.

Rabbi Bernstein politely rejected Rabbi Shapiro's suggestion that American Orthodox rabbis lobby their Israeli counterparts on behalf of Conservatism, but assured Rabbi Shapiro that his ideas would be given serious consideration.

So, is good, no?

Not to the five rabbis who made a conspicuous, if dignified, exit when Rabbi Shapiro began to speak. They represent factions—notably the Agudas Harabonim and the Moetzes Gedolei HaTorah—within the Council that opposed Rabbi Shapiro's having been

given the platform and had agitated for withdrawal of the invitation to him.

Rabbi David B. Hollander led the walkout. He was outspoken about his reason and that of his colleagues, asserting that the claim of the Conservatives to be Jews in the religious sense is "fraudulent" and that "their leaders are not rabbis," since they do not accept the *halacha* as divine commandments given at Sinai for all time.

Reporting in The New York Times, Ari L. Goldman observed that the controversy had been carried to Israel, where posters denouncing the Rabbinical Council's invitation to Rabbi Shapiro appeared in Mea Shearim; and that the wives of several rabbis had received letters urging them to keep their husbands from attending the convention.

Ethiopian Jews and America's Ethiopian Hebrews

The rescue of substantial numbers of Ethiopian Jews and their earlier (but still somewhat belated) recognition—more accurately, perhaps, legitimization—as Jews by Israeli religious authority have served to draw increased attention to black Jews elsewhere, especially the United States.

Halachically, relatively few black Americans are Jews. The Ethiopian Hebrews, composing some 500 families and ten congregations in the New York City area, resist formal *halachic* conversion, deeming themselves descendents of the ancient Israelites, like the Falashas, but culturally distinct from mainstream Judaism, which they regard as a Europeanization of the ancient Hebrew faith. Consequently, the outreach

to black Jews in recent years by New York's Federation, encouraging the enrollment of their children in Jewish day schools and summer camps, resulting in some 150 *halachic* conversions, included few if any Ethiopian Hebrews. They consider themselves already *halachically* Jewish, contending that they are the progeny of ancestors who practiced Judaism in Africa and professed other religions only because they were coerced, like the Maranos, into doing so.

There are other Afro-American sects that claim descent from ancient Israel: the Rastafarians and Yahwists, as examples. But what distinguishes the Ethiopian Hebrews from such sects is their adherence to Jewish Orthodox tenets and rituals: strict Kashruth and Sabbath and Holy Day observance, synagogue services according to an Orthodox prayer book, with women and men in segregated sections, etc. They send most of their children—those who do not attend Jewish day schools—to afternoon classes conducted by their synagogues; they train their own rabbis at their own Israelite Rabbinical Academy (in St. Albans, Queens).

Their non-recognition by mainstream white Judaism most Ethiopian Hebrews attribute to the racism that they perceive as pervasive in America. Some, indeed, claim more authenticity as Jews than the mainstream, which they dismiss as a European usurpation of the genuine Hebrew tradition. They see their claim to authentic Jewishness as strengthened by the *aliyah* of the Falashas, whom they regard as sharers in a common cultural heritage.

An Ancient Torah Scroll Retrieved

Torah scrolls of venerable provenance keep turning up in unexpected places. Recently, one dating back to the 15th or possibly the 14th century

was discovered in the library of Oberlin College. For over 70 years, since its acquisition by Oberlin as a gift from a former theological student there, it had been thought to be a 19th century document of small value. A Jewish faculty member thought it warranted closer examination and last fall a research group identified it as having been created, most probably, in North Africa and brought to Palestine by Spanish Jews around the time of the expulsion in 1492. The rotted wooden rollers of the scroll are being replaced and the goatskin on which it is enscribed is being restored.

Another scroll, once housed in the ark of a synagogue in Polna, Czechoslovakia, now is used by a recently established congregation in Hawaii. The Jewish community of Polna was totally exterminated by the Nazis. The scroll survived in the Nazi program of preservation of Jewish artifacts for a "museum of an extinct race" and became part of the Prague Jewish Museum, from which 1500 Torahs were sent to London, the Polna scroll among them. The Hawaiian congregation (in Kona) asked for one and was given the scroll from Polna.

Jewish Genes

Yes, indeed, it appears there are. Tay-Sachs, of course, has long since been established as a genetic affliction of Jews. Now another genetically transmitted disease has been detected among Ashkenazic Jews. It is more general than Tay-Sachs and in some sense more threatening since it causes infertility in both sexes. Readers interested in technical details can find them in the July 1985 issue of the *American Journal of Human Genetics*.

More general confirmation of Jewish genetic distinctiveness has been produced by studies of DNA conducted at Tel Aviv University. These have shown,

for example, that Jews from Iraq have more in common, genetically, with Jews from Poland than either have with non-Jews in their respective countries of origin.

On the other hand, the genetic characteristics of Yemenite Jews are usually those of peoples of the Saudi-Arabian peninsula; those of Cochin Jews are similar to those of the Indian population in which they live. And the Ethiopian Jews recently resettled in Israel are genetically kin to several Ethiopian tribes.

All of which inspires much speculation and has small programmatic significance. (This, of course, is opinion; what precedes it is fact—more or less.)

Another Approach to Soviet Jewry

At its recent (May 1985) annual convention, the Cantors Assembly (Conservative cantors) initiated discussion of a proposal to organize periodic visits to the USSR by teams of cantors, rabbis and teachers to reinforce Jewish identity among Russian Jews through traditional Jewish songs and prayers.

The proposal was advanced in an address to the gathering by Abe J. Bayer, director of international affairs of the National Jewish Community Relations Advisory Council.

Means to implement the proposal are to be considered by a joint commission representing the Cantors Assembly, the Rabbinical Assembly and Educators Assembly (all Conservative).

Jewish Graduates of Service Academy

At graduation ceremonies last spring at the U.S. Military Academy, the Air Force Academy, the Naval Academy and the Coast Guard Academy, a total of 28 Jews were commissioned: 11 in the Army, 8 in the Air Force, 5 in the Navy,

4 in the Coast Guard. One of the Army cadets and one of the Air Force cadets are women.

Barcelona Jews

Barcelona's 4,000 or so Jews are a minuscule portion of the city's two million inhabitants, as the 12,000 in all Spain are of the nation's population. Like the country, the city was *judenrein* for some 450 years after the 1492 expulsion. After the First World War, Jews began trickling into Spain. Now the small community is organized and relatively assertive, both of its civil rights and its advocacy of Spanish recognition of Israel. The synagogue on Pervenir Street in Barcelona is the first to be built anywhere on the Iberian peninsula in 500 years. Both Sephardim and Ashkenazim use it, together for Sabbath services, the conduct of an all-day school and various communal activities; separately for High Holiday services. A block or so away a shop dispenses kosher meat. Gabe Levenson, syndicated travel writer for Jewish-English publications, found it being carved and wrapped by women wearing large gold crosses.

Maimonides' Birthplace and His 850th Birthday

This year, 1985, is the 850th anniversary of the birth of Maimonides, in Cordoba, Spain, March 30, 1135. There are known to have been Jews in the city since at least 711, when it fell to the Moors. Jews prospered under Moorish rule and Cordoba became a major center of Jewish learning, only to fall victim to the fanaticism of Moslem fundamentalism when Maimonides was 13. He produced his major writings in Egypt, where he was a court physician.

It was not until 750 years after his birth that Spain accorded Maimonides

any official recognition. In 1884 the Cordoba synagogue, long since converted to a church and later to the headquarters of an artisans' guild, was declared a national monument; and, in 1935, the 800th anniversary of Maimonide's birth was commemorated with a convocation there. A more elaborate ceremony was staged this year, including a service in the restored synagogue on March 30, the anniversary date.

Gay Jews from Around the World

It came as a surprise to the editor of these random items—and so it may to their readers (if any)—that there are a sufficient number of gay synagogues here and abroad to have produced 200 delegates to a week-long International Conference of Gay and Lesbian Jews—the ninth such—in Washington, D.C. last spring; and that there is a World Congress of Gay and Lesbian Jewish Organizations, which sponsored the conclave. Represented were members of gay synagogues in Canada, Belgium, France, Holland and Israel, as well as the United States.

Jewish "establishment" figures participated; among them, Joseph Breslau, president of the United Jewish Appeal Federation of Greater Washington, who led a workshop on the plight of Ethiopian Jews; Lester Kaplan, executive director of Washington's Jewish Community Center, Michael Berney of the Jewish Community Council, and Rabbi Andrew Baker, Central Atlantic Region director for the American Jewish Committee, who participated in a panel on "Lesbians and Gay Men in the Jewish Establishment."

Many "straight" Jews are troubled by the rise in visibility of gay Jews, according to a survey about a year ago by the American Jewish Committee. Of a random sample of 1000 Jews (one must as-

sume that it included some gays) 43 percent so expressed themselves (49% disagreed).

Bitburg Cost West Germany

President Reagan's controversial visit to the Bitburg war cemetery had a severe adverse financial effect on American tourism to West Germany. The German tourist promotion center in New York reported thousands of cancellations of vacation trips by Americans, resulting in the loss of at least 200,000 overnight stays in West German hotels. The loss to the hotels alone was estimated at several million dollars, not to mention losses to other sectors of the West German economy.

The Ancient Blood Libel and a Courageous Bishop

That the long-discredited medieval ritual-murder libel against the Jews still has adherents comes as a shock. In Rinn, a village in the Austrian Tyrol is a Catholic church named Judenstein (Jews' Rock). Well, not quite a Catholic church, because it was banned by the Vatican back in 1961. But it remains and, banned or not, it attracts pilgrims who converge on it several times a year. The decorations of the church reflect the traditions it seeks to perpetuate; and those traditions include the infamous blood libel. Specifically, they hold that in 1462 Jewish merchants killed a three-year-old Christian child to use his blood for ritual purposes; and that the soul of the child mediates between worshippers and the Deity in transmitting prayers.

Not long ago, the Bishop of Tyrol ordered the church closed, and had it padlocked. The action touched off a strenuous protest. A petition demanding that the church be reopened gathered some 3,000 signatures and some of those signing threatened to

leave the Catholic Church if the demand was not met. The bishop, at last reading, was holding out against the pressure. In a pastoral letter, he told the inhabitants of Rinn that, even if most of them are not anti-Semitic, they are upholding a tradition that is defamatory and that has brought unspeakable horrors to Jews and disgraced Christians in the eyes of the world.

A Unique Village in Israel

Kfar Rafael in Beer Sheva, Israel is a unique village. The villagers are mentally handicapped. They live in single-level houses, make most of their simple furniture in village carpentry shops, weave the curtains, bedspreads and rugs that adorn their homes, raise most of the fruit and vegetables that they consume on land that once was arid desert. The population of Kfar Rafael grows as it is augmented by acceptance into the community of "graduates" of a home *cum* school for mentally handicapped children, Beth Aliyahu, nearby. As young children, some of the residents were unable to talk—they learned to speak; some could not stand—they learned to walk; some could not hold a spoon—they learned to feed themselves. Others had less arduous struggles against their handicaps. But all have been transformed—from objects of pity to contributing members of a community in whose achievements they share justifiable pride.

As in the case of most such enterprises, there is a saga behind Kfar Rafael and Beth Aliyahu. It begins with a vision in the mind of 16 year old Chava, refugee from the Holocaust, who dreamed of establishing in Israel a home for children in need of special care. Only 30 years later did the dream materialize. Chava was by then married and had two sons. Her husband and two women friends who shared her dream

were her collaborators. The friends were a teacher (from Latin America) and a worker in a hospital for the mentally handicapped (from England). Her husband, a businessman, had some access to the government bureaucracy, and succeeded in getting authorization for establishment of a home.

The story must be briefed in this space; the reader will have to imagine some of the drama involved in raising the needed financing, the planning, the building, the transition from idea to reality.

A derelict hotel in Beer Sheva—containing a few decrepit beds and minimal kitchens—large enough to house 18 children and necessary staff, was purchased with a down payment supplied by Chava's brother in Switzerland. The Minister of Labor and Social Welfare gave his Ministry's blessing to the project, thereby agreeing to pay towards the upkeep of each child. From Germany, early in 1969, came a group of youths from the *Sühnezeichen*—German youth who, still today, come and work wherever they are needed in Israel in expiation of the sins committed by the Nazis—who built, installed wiring, altered plumbing, scrubbed and painted.

The first three children moved into Beth Eliyahu in April, 1969. Six years later, it was obvious that the confines of the house were restricting further advances in the now grown-up children's development and that other needy children could not be admitted for lack of space.

The solution: a village. Four hard years later, land was found and Ministry approval granted for this new development. In April 1979 the cornerstone of Kfar Rafael was laid—and in April, 1981, the first three foster families, together with twelve "graduates" from Beth Eliyahu moved into the village. One of the three original foster families

is that of Chava's younger son, his wife and their three children. By the end of 1985 there will be 26 "villagers", five foster families and some ten or twelve coworkers living at Kfar Rafael. (The intake to Beth Eliyahu is constant for there are many children waiting for each vacancy created when someone leaves to go to Kfar Rafael.)

The work of the staff is on three planes: the physical, bodily requirements; education towards self reliance and independence within the extended family and the larger village community; and cultural activities—viz., musical evenings, art, drama and storytelling—the Jewish festivals offer opportunities for the villagers to extend themselves and give greater expression to their individualities. Through the family they learn to relate to an external, loving world, of which they are an integral part.

Kfar Rafael is vibrant, and growing. But problems abound. Government grants cover barely 60% of today's running costs; the rest must come from donations. Both Beth Eliyahu and Kfar

Rafael were purchased and built only with private funds. The agricultural land of the village is leased from the government at a minimal annual rent, so long as it remains purely agricultural. For all overhead (electricity, water, etc.) the village must pay regular rates. The staff are idealists and, apart from board and lodging, accept only pocket money.

A new building is urgently required if there is to be sufficient working space for the 26 handicapped villagers (the ultimate goal is 70). The work facilities have to be geared to the capabilities of the villagers—not all of them have the physical strength for agricultural work. Plans have been approved for a new building which will house a mechanised laundry to cope with the increasing daily load, a bakery and an enlarged weaving area. The money for it must still be raised.

Kfar Rafael's address is P.O.B. 425, Beer Sheva 84 103, Israel.

[Note: The foregoing was adapted—and in parts excerpted—from a report by Diana Morris, of the Jerusalem staff of State of Israel Bonds.]