

Translating Jewish Commitment into Practice*

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I LAST had the privilege of addressing this convention exactly seven years ago tonight, on June 8, 1968. I say "privilege" rather than "pleasure" because, as some of you will remember, that was the day on which Robert Kennedy was buried. I was myself a Kennedy man, and so remember little else of the occasion, but even those who weren't supporters of Robert Kennedy were his mourners that day, mourners for our nation gone berserk.

Nineteen hundred and sixty-eight was, I think you will agree, a very long time ago indeed. It was before Richard Nixon acceded to power and then to what, let us pray, will be an absolutely unique status in the history of the American presidency, and it was before the Chicago Democratic convention, before the Cambodian incursion, before Attica, before Agnew, before a hundred other arrows that have made the outrageous conventional. And, for those of us assembled here, it was also before Lod, before Munich, before Yom Kippur, before Kiryat Shmona and Ma'alot and Beit Shan and the Savoy Hotel. Which is to say, it was before we were so rudely and so persistently and so successfully reminded of Jewish vulnerability.

We are, all of us, older now, much older, perhaps even a bit wiser as well. I sometimes think that a degree of naivete is bred into us in each generation, that each generation goes through a phase when it imagines that it has found the answer, the ultimate answer, the zipless solution. And then it learns, against its will, that there is no alchemy that will

turn our dross into gold. There is only and forever the painstaking effort of a thousand precinct workers working the tenements of turmoil in which we live, door to door peddlers of solace, from time to rare time of redemption as well.

The play on words is too tempting: Door to door, dor l'dor—from house to house, from generation to generation. Which brings me to my theme of this evening, which is also your theme of this meeting, namely, "Translating Jewish Commitment Into Practice."

The selection of this theme is, obviously, based on an assumption, and that assumption is that the great ideological battles which have been waged over the past several decades, the battles between the purveyors of social services under Jewish auspices and purveyors of Judaism has now, by and large, been resolved, not so much by the victory of one side over the other as by a recognition that the differences between the two had been badly put and improperly understood. The choice had never been between secular therapy and sectarian therapy, not really. The question had been, and remains, whether one does right by one's client, be the client a person or a community, by treating his Jewishness as an irrelevant coincidence. And now this assemblage collectively assumes that Jewishness is no coincidence, but, instead, a resource, and the question asked is how that resource can be maximized, how it can best be developed, for its own sake and for the sake of those who call themselves Jews.

From house to house, from generation to generation. We are partners in space and partners in time, and our work is

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simultaneously with each Jew as a unit and with all Jews as a unity. That work unfolds between several sets of polarities and choices.

The first is the most current, and the most characteristic of our own location in Jewish time. It is the polarity between hope and despair. These days, we suffer from a kind of psychic whiplash, as we continue to adjust to the shifting currents of events, most especially with respect to Israel. Thinking about Israel is almost always an experience in anxiety, and that anxiety lives side-by-side with the new hope so many of us share for the possibilities of Jewish life in America. It is not easy to deal with the rapid changes in mood which our Jewishness occasions; each day, as it were, is half-June of 1967, half-Yom Kippur of 1973, and my own experience in this regard suggests that there is no telling for which of us which half will happen when, with the result that much communal planning and conversation seems almost spliced together, two different and contradictory senses juxtaposed uneasily. Some of us feel crisis just when the rest feel reassured; when the first become calm, the second become nervous.

And why not? The psychic boundaries which are our inheritance and our condition, which provide our central paradigm, were set by the incredible juxtaposition in time of the Holocaust and the Rebirth of Israel. While I resist and resent the effort to establish a theological connection between the two, there is no hiding from the temporal connection, hence also from the psychic impact of that connection. In our own day, we have been witness to the nadir of our People, as also to one of its most marvellous accomplishments, and the time between the two was the blink of an eye.

My comments this evening are not intended as a refutation of despair; I save that for other occasions. Those of us who labor daily in the Jewish vine-

yard neither require inspirational rhetoric nor are benefited by it. We do not require it because we see, in the smallest and hence the most important ways of all, each day, examples of hope, and we would not be benefited by it because we know, after all, that despair is an inevitable part of our baggage. I have, in fact, often wondered about the curious coupling in Jewish history and in Jewish education of sorrow and joy, and I must say that I am somewhat troubled by the degree to which sorrow often gets the upper hand. If we look closely at the mood and the assumptions which inform our educational behaviour, whether in the classroom or in our organizational life, it is often as if the induction to Jewish life were seen as an induction into tragedy and mourning.

I think I understand why this is so. Those of us who have taken on responsibility for Jewish continuity feel so desperately urgent about our work, about our mission, that we cannot be casual towards those who do not share our sense of urgency. We must impress them, therefore, we think, with the seriousness of the matter, and it is only a small step from the sober to the somber. And Jewish history, in any case lends itself to such an exposition. Tragedies experienced, tragedies only narrowly averted, destruction, exile, slaughter. At Chanukah, the temple was defiled; at Pesach, we remember slavery; at Purim, we are saved by the ball; at Rosh Hashanah, a terrible book is opened, and ten days later, it is slammed shut to a shofar's blast. Our fiction is preoccupied with death, our reality with pogrom. Our Jewish juices stop their normal trickling, start flowing freely only when others rise up against us.

Nor is this simply a matter of historical record. It is also, and more, a matter of present perception. We need only

observe how the Holocaust is used as a stimulant for identity, for philanthropy, for commitment, to understand the degree to which we have assumed it, with all its horror, as the controlling metaphor for the modern Jew. Salo Baron was right when he spoke of the "lachrymose theory of Jewish history," but he was not right enough: there is a lachrymose streak in our present as well, and it is as distorting to the present as it is to the past.

I want to say this in two slightly different ways, as well, and then go on to derive a conclusion. First: We are a people of rememberers and of dreamers. We recall the past with studied regularity, in holy day and in language and in classroom; we recall it with stunning feats of collective memory. And we imagine a future, at the end of days, that stands in almost melodramatic contrast to the dreary episodes which crowd our actual memories. We are, as it were, suspended between past and future, between madness and messiah. Our memories make us pessimists, our dreams make us optimists. What is missing, of course, is a present, a Now. I wonder whether the fact that Hebrew grammar has no present tense is purely happenstance, or whether our grammar may not have presaged our destiny. In either case, I do not think it healthy, in the most elemental meaning of psychic health, to be shorn of our present, to live exclusively in *hayamim habem*, in those days, and in *acharit hayamim*, in the end of days. "Come," we say, invitingly, "enter with us the house of Judaism, and we will teach you how it was, and how it will yet be. Enter time with us, a time that has already been, a time that will surely come again. But ask not how it is, here and now, that is not for us to say. The others own the present; we are only tenants, and tenants-at-will at that."

There is no task more urgent than

that of reclaiming a Jewish present, of owning our own time, free and clear.

And one more observation: A Judaism that is centrally informed by tragedy, a Judaism that knows no present tense, is almost inevitably a Judaism imposed on Jews as an uncomfortable burden, draped around our necks like garland of guilt. I do not wish to expound on the status of guilt as a Jewish motive, on the exploitation of guilt in our organized work, on the invocation of guilt as a rationale for our endeavor. Philip Roth has said it most explicitly, and Saul Bellow most eloquently, and our teachers and parents and leaders most insistently. We are as rich in guilt as Saudi Arabia is in oil, and I wish as fervently in the one case as the other that we can soon develop alternative sources of energy.

From all of which, at last, I now derive a conclusion: What we need to be about, as an organized community, the way in which we can most effectively translate our Jewish commitment into Jewish practice is simply to provide our people with the opportunity, long since denied them, to experience in their own lifetimes Judaic success.

If there is any experience from which our generation of Jews has been cut off, it is precisely the experience of Judaic success. Amnesia is a chronic Jewish disease of epidemic proportions. Our memories, to the degree that we remember, are mainly of failure. Our early education, which is all most of us have ever had, was almost invariably an exposure to the frustration of not learning Hebrew. Each of us who is not observant carries with him the sense of commandments violated, and each of us who is observant knows the commandments he does not observe by name. We are urged unremittingly to come to Israel's aid, and we respond marvelously well, but marvelously well is never enough, and we still manage to

get to Las Vegas. We know there are books to be read, and sometimes we read them, but we know that a lifetime of reading will not be enough, so vast is our library. We know that we are to seek justice, and we feel ourselves liberal, but we know as well that there are limits to our liberal dispositions, closer in than they ought to be. Some of us feel guilty still about being alive while the others perished, and some of us feel guilty about being here while the others defend and risk death, and almost all of us feel guilty about our own incompetence as Jews. We romanticize the *shetl*, and feel ourselves wanting; we romanticize the Lower East Side, and feel ourselves wanting; we romanticize our grandparents, and feel ourselves wanting. Judaism hovers about us, an enveloping superego, scolding, reminding, instructing, thou-shalt-ing that-shalt-not-ing, suffocating.

Perhaps that is why the Lubavitch movement has experienced such startling success in its efforts to proselytize among the young. Perhaps it is not their authenticity, but the evident fact that they have made it, Jewishly, that they know success, hence also joy as Jews.

For the plain fact is that ours is the single most successful generation of Jews in all our history, when judged by secular standards, and that the vast discrepancy between secular success and Judaic failure serves as a constant annoying backdrop to our lives. There are ten times ten thousand people in this country who would delight to celebrate Pesach, but who are intimidated by their sense of inadequacy, of Judaic incompetence. Successful in their careers, tuned in to the latest trends in culture and in consumption, they are awkward as Jews, embarrassedly self-conscious about engaging in behavior that is unfamiliar, that falls short of the standards of excellence they have success-

fully adopted in the other arenas of their activity. And their sense of inadequacy is born of reality, exaggerated though it be by all the cautionary sermons. Why try at all, when nothing you are likely to be able to achieve will be enough, not nearly enough? The issue is not, after all, how to raise another generation of Jewish scholars; that issue, happily, seems on its way to resolution. The issue is how to combine Judaism and car-pooling, Judaism and tennis, Judaism and life that is lived excellently well.

I see it everywhere I go. It is not only in this organization that the fundamental battle of Jewish identity has been fought, and won. It is in vast precincts of the American Jewish community. For whatever the reasons, Jews in large numbers are now newly accessible to Judaism, newly willing, newly open. We have won the battle of intentions. But the translation of intentions into meanings, and meanings into behaviors—that is the difficult battle in which all of us are now required to engage.

And that is why I have chosen to focus on this theme in this talk. For if I am correct in my description, then the issue of how the professionals within our community go about the problem of translation seems to me a fairly simple one, straightforward in its statement, coherent in its solution. We do not stand outside the community, committing our several forms of therapy upon it. Insofar as I am right about our condition, it is the condition of professionals not less, or only marginally less, than of lay people. Judaic competence? Was there ever a generation of Jewish professionals more illiterate than ours? Ever since the Holocaust, we have been served by bootstrappers, reservists filling in the gaps in our defenses with inadequate training, with inadequate weapons, brazening it out in a valiant effort to hold

the line while a new generation is properly prepared.

Such a new generation is in the making. Its hallmark, I believe, is its eagerness for Jewish growth, and its readiness to share that growth with its clients. That is, after all, the most and the best that we can hope to contribute. We can, each of us, announce in our own behavior that the self-consciousness of exercising the Jewish options in our lives can be overcome, that Judaism can be a source of joy as well as meaning, that we who lead do not patronize, but lead mostly by example.

I do not mean by this to play Hubert Humphrey to our malaise, preaching an easy Judaism of joy as antidote to our distress. I mean instead to suggest that the task of constructing an American Jewish community of nerve and purpose, a community both more healthy and more energetic than we have thus far known, can, in the end, be accomplished only by example. Judaism is not something we have and seek now to share with others, but something we ourselves pursue, and it is in the pursuit of it that we ask others to join. Then, can there be any better way, any more honest or more hopeful way, than to conduct that pursuit as publically as possible, to make it the center of our activity as communal workers?

The Judaism we might thus present, and represent, is an invitation rather than a yoke. It will acknowledge failure, inevitably, but it will be a Judaism built of modest successes, of gradual expansion from the corners of our lives to their center, to their core.

How preach joy save by the experience of it? Shall we sit ourselves on the corner of the bed and talk about how good it's going to be, or shall we do it, with all the risks which thereunto pertain? We are all of us, on the same team, and if history and the shape of

our own ambitions have cast us as coaches, we are player-coaches still, and our own turn at the bat will be watched by our teammates with special attention. We need not bat a thousand, we could not, but we cannot, we dare not, protect ourselves behind the screen of professional distance, telling "them" how to solve problems each of us knows he himself has not yet solved.

I purposely avoided the term "role model," since I do not perceive Judaism as role, but, instead, as way-of-life, and I do not see the task as how to better play a role, but instead, how to work towards greater integration of our lives. The search for integration is also a quest for integrity, and that is what I speak about. And it is in that context, very much in that context, that I turn now, at last to several of the specific policy-oriented questions your program chairman and my old friend saw fit to put to me in his letter of invitation.

A suggestive, but by no means exhaustive, list would include a further definition of "Jewish commitment," regarding which the only wisdom I have to share is that we now must move, in Ben Halpern's words, from liking Judaism to meaning it, and the task is a good deal more difficult than at first it seems. The difficulty arises chiefly from the fact that "meaning it" involves coming to terms, or at least to grips, with the issue of religious intention, an issue most of us have felt relieved to be able to ignore, for these many years. I believe, for example, that a Jewish life, that is not naturally at home with Jewish idiom, that does not depend centrally for its world-view on Jewish metaphor, is a Jewish life become mute. So, too, as we proceed, all of us, to further definition, we will discover that the Judaism of the generation we nostalgically remember is unavailable to us, for it was a more organic Judaism than we will likely ever know. Ours is per-

force more willed, hence more constructed, more artificial. Morally, that may give us the edge, since we have chosen what others knew only as a fixed condition. But the moral advantage is little consolation for the loss involved, a loss which, who knows, some future generation, our own children perhaps, may yet make good.

I was also asked to comment on the extent to which communal service must be seen as a form of Jewish education. To this I would respond only that the day may yet come when we will have an institution of Jewish higher education in this country where communal workers and teachers will study side by side, each knowing the other, each both. No education happens mostly in the classroom, Jewish education least of all. Which is also a part of the answer to the question regarding the relationship between our work and that of the rabbinate and the synagogue. The other part of the answer is that so long as so radical a distinction continues to be made between our life as partners in a religious faith and our life as partners in peoplehood, so long will we live a distorted life as Jews. The solution here does not lie in returning all communal authority to the rabbis and all communal activity to the synagogues. It lies, instead, or so it seems to me, in a vastly reformed concept of communal service, a concept according to which rabbis, as the rest of us, are employed by the community, work as specialized members of a team, learn better how to work together with their lay people, set aside their conventional patronizing behavior towards the people they presume to lead. I know too few rabbis who have genuine respect for their congregants, and the absence of respect even more than organizational distortion is at the root of the synagogal malaise.

In these opening remarks, I have had

neither the freedom nor the responsibility to treat of specific answers to all the questions we can ask. I have, therefore, instead, proposed a single answer to all these questions an answer to which I now return, and with which, in the form of a *midrash*, I conclude:

Our translation of the *Shma* is an optional translation. When we say, as we do, "Hear O Israel, the Lord Our God, the Lord is One," we impose a specific meaning on the Hebrew which may or may not hew to its original intentions. In our conventional translation, the statement suggests that the gods of others are many, and the *Shma* becomes a ringing affirmation of our opposition to idolatry, of our monotheistic conviction. But the Hebrew can as easily and as correctly translated, "Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, Only He is One." By which, instead of a statement of quantity, one God as against many gods, the *Shma* becomes a description of quality—Oneness, or in current parlance, togetherness, or, as I prefer, integrity, as against uncertainty, rough edges, compartments, fractures. Only God has got it together; for the rest of us, there is a tree of knowledge, and there is a tree of life, and we are caught between the two, divided into right hemispheres and left hemispheres, between cognition and affect, between knowing and believing, between understanding and caring. We are expelled from the Garden until, on that day, we become ourselves one again, and hence know His name as One.

We are a long way from that day; as human beings and as Jews, we are bound to stitch our lives together, the seams most often crooked, expressions of yearning more than craftsmanship. Now and again, we are permitted a foretaste of that day, a moment when it does all come together, magic and science joined, rational inquiry and mystical belief coupled, heart and mind

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fused, commitment, if you will, translated into practice. Most of the time, the effort is cumbersome, and it therefore becomes important to remind ourselves why it is we undertake it. We do so, I believe, not simply because the *Shma* is a prayer we repeat, but because it describes a condition to which we aspire. Is it not so that the central book of Jewish knowledge, the Torah itself, is called a Tree of Life? Knowledge becomes life, the Garden re-entered. In the meantime, until that ultimate success, there are only the bits and pieces

of success we can make more central to our work. It is these I have proposed we seek to be about, and share more forcefully and more explicitly as we engage in the continuing translation which is our daily work. That work which is, in the end, intended to insure that nothing gets lost in our translation—and, since it is impossible to translate without loss, it is, finally, intended to make translation obsolete, fusing commitment to practice seamlessly, organically, redemptively.