

REJOINDER

Charles Liebman has written a thoughtful critique of the speeches which comprise my recent book and in consonance with "A Journal of Orthodox Jewish Thought" has appraised my views as they might relate to the Orthodox Jewish sector. It is obvious that he has grave reservations as to whether traditional Jewry should get too close to the Jewish Community Center, because there can be no universal squaring of its "Torah, Halakhah and Theology," but only a compromise or dilution.

It is self-evident that if the Center would conform in every respect with the philosophy and practices of Orthodoxy (or for that matter Conservatism or Reform) it might never have been created in the first instance over one hundred years ago, nor survived and prospered as well as it has into the second half of the 20th century. In establishing their "religious" policies, centers have endeavored to include the broadest spectrum of American Jewry, including the Orthodox. Hence, most observe *kashrut*, close their doors on the Sabbath and major holy days and festivas, do not provide their own nor house other religious services, only infrequently conduct formal Jewish educational classes, and do not schedule ceremonials like weddings, nor do they offer catering services for various *simchot*.

One can see from this list of proscriptions and exclusions that most of the vital Jewish life-prolonging activities have been "denied" to an institution that also purports to contribute to Jewish survival. This has contributed in part to its evaluation as a "supplementary," if not a "marginal" institution. At best it is seen as one which slows down the rate of assimilation, at worst as one that surely ushers in the demise of the Jewish community and thus digs its own inevitable grave.

While I do not intend to withdraw any of my own strictures against the Center, I still contend that it has within it the ingredients to establish what might possibly be the "synagogue" of the 21st century. Contemporary religious institutions, theolo-

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gical concepts, traditional practices among all the sects, Jewish and non-Jewish, are on the defensive as they try to cope with universal criticism born of pragmatism, millenarianism, scientific rationalism and atheism. While a staunch, official Orthodoxy has not yet questioned God's eternal vitality, these theological quests have shaken the other official denominations. The effect on the Jewish masses is already evident, because, as of old, they are always ready to forget unless forced by circumstance or Jewish leadership to remember. I agree with Dr. Lieberman that the destiny of the Jewish people is inextricably tied in with our concept of God. The individual, the family, the institution, the community and all of Israel have meaning only as this historically ubiquitous force commands our attention. But how to provide or revive this confrontation of the Jews with God is the baffling educational problem of our time. (Witness the Symposium in *Commentary* August 1966).

Since the synagogue, despite its undeniable strength, does not sustain the interest of most Jews, and since it has not even fulfilled its major role of educating its own membership to be knowledgeable about the Jewish experience, to participate actively and philanthropically in Jewish institutions, to refine their behavior and, finally, to commit themselves to Jewish continuity, the laurels may fall on another institution — like the Jewish Community Center — to perform precisely that very role, even if it is forced to compete with the synagogue. Freed from rigid theological restraints, it may innovate. I suspect that even with the present thrust for "experimentation," sound traditions will not be ignored, but will be reincorporated with modifications, just as Jewish traditions have reluctantly, not enthusiastically, changed in the past. The rediscovery, even the restoration, of our tradition has often been a major factor in influencing those who thought they were on the way out. I have found that the Center can often do this better than the synagogue. The tragedy is that it does not always see this as its major task with undereducated Jews.

But even for those who are affiliated with the synagogue, including traditional ones, the broader perspectives of the center (and I'm not referring to the sauna baths and pool) have an

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additional attraction. Whereas the rabbi has become the synagogue's vicarious instrument for representing the congregation, which no longer wishes to perform rites or *mitzvot*, hence lay leadership is often confined; in the center one discovers not only an opportunity for self-expression, but the encouragement for leadership development on ever-expanding fronts is built into its very fabric. While it is true that such leadership has not always been Jewishly informed, there is no reason why it could not become so if the center was bold enough to engage more universally in Jewish educational and even religious programming.

Unlike the synagogue, which prides itself on being pristinely independent, the center is an official Jewish communal institution, usually created after careful study by the Jewish community of the need and thereafter supported, often generously, by organized Jewish communal effort. The synagogue, while the product of Jewish group effort, does not usually seek Jewish communal sanction and jealously protects its autonomy. Its strength, the quality of its program, rises or falls on the basis of its own financial ingenuity, its class position, its unique integrity, or the gift of charismatic religious leaders.

If the center has not yet had a significant Jewish influence, although this would be difficult to measure one way or the other, apart from its own *pareve* attitudes on Jewish life, it has been constantly delimited with respect to its intramural Jewish functions. It has not been permitted, let alone encouraged, to erect buildings and inaugurate services in heavily-populated Jewish neighborhoods, where synagogues-Centers have pre-empted the turf. If Jewish Centers only enroll 125,000 Jews in Greater New York where better than 2,000,000 Jews reside, it is only because of their communally enforced timidity, plus this synagogal proscription. The request for center services has come from every section, including those members affiliated with large and excellent synagogue center facilities, borrowed without acknowledgement, from the original Jewish Community Center. The existence of many more centers in such Jewish neighborhoods might sharpen the standards of synagogues which claim to serve the Jewish community adequately,

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or confine the synagogue to the functions it can or should perform, namely worship and education.

If the Center was encouraged to provide Jewish educational programs from the pre-school through the aged, to teach the family as well as the individual, to reach out to the rejecting teenager and the reluctant young adult at home and at college, to attract the adult intellectual (including the Yiddishist, the Zionist and the radical), we might end up with at least more Jewishly-educated young people and adults who might fill the bucket which now has only a trickle of knowledgeable and committed traditional Jews.

I doubt if Orthodoxy and the Centers through dialogue will ever agree on a common philosophy and program. However, there is room for the Orthodox in the Center, if they can tolerate association with other Jews. But I do know that if they proscribe the centers' creation of full-scale Jewish programs, it will not contribute to more knowledgeable Jews, nor the professional leadership that makes such knowledge possible, nor will it add to the enrollment of existing synagogues, and it will even diminish the number of Jews who will survive in the future.