

Jewish Continuity: More and Less

“Families who embrace both Christian and Jewish holidays will find this a welcome addition to the bookshelf, says Publisher’s Weekly of a new children’s book, *Light the Lights: A Story About Celebrating Hanukkah and Christmas*, which has just come across my desk.

The publisher’s own blurb, claiming that this is a “perfect holiday story for the many families who observe both Hanukkah and Christmas,” informs us that the author was “surprised to find that she couldn’t find a children’s book that reflected the holiday traditions of interfaith families (such as her own),” so she decided to write one herself. This book, we are assured, “will be enjoyed by the growing number of families who celebrate both Hanukkah and Christmas.”

A minor cavil before the major one: This little volume underestimates the intelligence even of the 3 to 7 year olds for whom it was written, but it provides a valuable insight into what passes for religious observance within intermarried families. Hanukkah is nothing more than dreidels, latkes, and colorful candles in the menorah. As for the defilement and purification of the Temple, the rebellion against Hellenistic ways, the miracle of the oil, the intervention of God, the need *lehodot ulehallel leshimcha hagadol*—these are apparently superfluous addenda to the main theme, which is the fun that Hanukkah is.

Christmas fares no better: it is sugar cookies to eat, carols to sing, a shining tree under which to place gifts, and Santa Claus. Nothing about anyone’s birth or about the fact that this is a sacred moment in the life of a Christian. If I were a Christian, I would be offended by a story that deals with my major religious festival and mentions nothing about why the festival is celebrated.

But I am a Jew. I am not offended; I am depressed. Not because this book reduces Hanukkah to nothingness—this is itself is not a shock to anyone living in America—but because the “growing number” of intermarried families has become so integral a part of the American landscape that book publishers now target the children of such families with attractive little volumes that legitimate their condition.

The major American Jewish organizations are of course concerned by this turn of events. Shocked by a 1990 population

study that shows that because of intermarriage and assimilation we are faced with the looming specter of a dwindling Jewish community, they are mobilizing their considerable organizational prowess to guarantee Jewish continuity.

Which hardly alleviates one's depression. These are, after all, the same organizations with the same kind of leadership and agenda that for a generation have set the skewed priorities and forged the wrong alliances which helped steer us to the edge of this black abyss. Instead of pouring millions into Jewish day schools, they poured millions into Jewish gymnasiums; instead of giving precedence to basic Jewish values, they genuflected to the failed gods of liberal secularism; instead of developing a leadership which was Jewishly knowledgeable, they sold the reins of leadership to those who were by and large Jewishly illiterate.

History has a disconcerting way of slapping in the face those who ignore her. That those who contributed to Jewish discontinuity should now be in charge of Jewish continuity, and that the Jewish future is in the hands of those who have little understanding of its past or present, is enough to dishearten even the most optimistic among us.

II

To be sure, priorities have now shifted somewhat, and the Jewish establishment today is a bit more sensitive to traditional Jewish norms, and Jewish education has moved up from the bottom of the list, and here and there one detects a glimmer of understanding of what Judaism is all about.

But one still wonders about the Jewish knowledge and awareness of these well-meaning custodians of the Jewish future. How, for example, would they respond to basic questions such as these:

- What is Jewish continuity, and why is it important?
- What is unique about Jewish history and the Jewish people?
- Is our miraculous survival attributable to our sameness or our distinctiveness?
- What role do God and the supernatural play in Jewish history?
- Should Jews remain a distinctive, separate people? Why?
- What is wrong with intermarriage? Why not assimilate?

- What beliefs and practices should a Jew follow today?
- Are you disturbed by books that depict families celebrating both Hanukkah and Christmas? Why?

And one further question: Do you comprehend the Jewish fact of life that no Jewish community in history has ever endured without three essential elements: 1) a sense of transcendence and spirituality; 2) emphasis on religious learning; and 3) the implementation of these concepts in daily life. Those communities for whom these were first principles became viable communities; those who ignored them quickly disappeared.

It is not happenstance that the one segment of American Jewry not suffering a continuity crisis is the one segment which has given these principles top priority. Deriving them from a belief in God, study of Torah, and practice of the mitzvot, Orthodox Jewry, historically dismissed by the major organizations, quietly went about ensuring a Jewish future. A generation ago they began building day schools, yeshivot and kollelim despite the opposition of the Jewish establishment that considered such things un-American; they stressed belief, spirituality, religious study, observance, and strong family life; they developed a vigorous community structure based on commitment and discipline.

Now, a generation later, they have virtually no intermarriage or assimilation; a birthrate far above replacement level; a community which is singularly devoted to Judaism and to the Jewish people; and, not incidentally, the highest proportion of Western Aliyah to Israel.

That the Orthodox across the board are far from perfect and that many painful issues require resolution, has been openly discussed in these pages on many occasions. But no one can gainsay the fact that this is the only Jewish American group that is vital and dynamic. Surely they must be doing something right. It is hard to understand, therefore, why it is that in the whirlwind of conferences and the blizzards of papers and proposals that deal with Jewish continuity, the establishment does not consider utilizing the Orthodox community as a model.

To suggest this is not to suggest that everyone will become Orthodox. It is to suggest that at the brink of the yawning chasm it is wise to consider rescue techniques that have worked for others.

What has not worked—the discontinuity model of the secu-

lar organizations—is clear. What is now required is the courage to turn back and set out on a new trail. Specifically, it is time to reject glib solutions and to mobilize all the energies of the organized Jewish community in an emergency crash program 1) to educate Jewishly all of our people by funding, building and upgrading day schools, yeshivot and community programs; 2) to raise teachers' salaries in order to retain talented teachers and to attract new ones to enter this calling; 3) to set as a goal the enrollment in intensive Jewish day schools of the over 90% of American Jewish youngsters who today receive no exposure to classical Judaism—even if this entails communal funding to subsidize tuition; 4) to pioneer innovative programs to deepen the Jewish knowledge and spirituality of single adults and Jewish families. If such a crash program means that pet projects will be curtailed, so be it. There will be no projects, pet or otherwise, if we disappear.

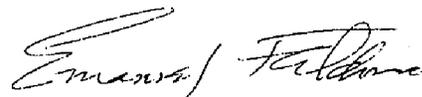
The question, in a word, is: do we have the mettle to move away from the dead end of a failed secularism and to make some tentative steps towards a religious world-view?

III

Despite all the noble intentions, all signs point to business-as-usual. Assemblies convene, resolutions are passed, committees are formed—and the same failed formulas are decked out in new costumes: take young people on visits to Israel or to Eastern Europe; increase allocations to Jewish education by a few percent; establish new programs for college youth; fund another Holocaust memorial; and—surprise!—reach out to the intermarried.

And while the establishment chews its cud, more and more books will be targeted to the growing number of families who embrace both Christian and Jewish holidays, and more and more once-Jewish children will kindle their lovely menorahs under sparkling trees, and more and more expensive studies will be commissioned, and more and more cries of alarm will be sounded.

And less and less Jews will be around to listen.



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