

RETURN TO SINAI

It is heartwarming to return to Sinai Temple, the scene of so many events of importance in my life and that of my family, moments of happiness and of sadness that give resonance to life.

Whether thinking of Sunday School or Confirmation, whether seeing in my mind's eye Rabbi Kagan officiating at my Bar Mitzvah, my wedding, or at the funeral of my father, I realize how many of my own spiritual rites of passage are connected with Crary Avenue. So it is a particular pleasure to play a part in the celebration of the 70th anniversary of the Congregation.

These 70 years span the most turbulent in the history of the Jews. It begins with the massive Jewish immigration to the United States at the turn of the century, continues through Hitler and the Holocaust which obliterated the vital world of eastern European Jewry, continues through the re-founding of the State of Israel and its victories in four wars of survival, and continues to this very day when we find Israel still fighting for physical survival and Diaspora Jewry girding to meet the challenge of prosperity and toleration as successfully as it did the challenge of hatred and discrimination.

Of all the events of the period, however, one that is emerging may be as important to the future of world Jewry as any of them, and that is the gradual, but, I believe, real emergence of a new creature on the world scene – a product equally of the Hebrew tradition and the American setting, an individual equally proud of Thomas Jefferson and Judah Maccabee, equally at home with Walt Whitman and Martin Buber, with Ralph Waldo Emerson and Abraham Joshua Heschel.

The American Jewish community has achieved an un-paralleled level of material well-being, prestige, and influence; virtually all the doors of our society are open to it; its challenge is to choose among acculturation, assimilation, and disappearance or a new Golden Age of spiritual evolution, accomplishment, and contribution.

It is interesting to note that 1906, the year of Sinai's founding, was the year of the largest Jewish immigration to the United States and the year of the worst Cossack raids on Jewish villages in Russia. In *Fiddler on the Roof*, the exodus from Anatevka took place in 1906, as did the founding of the American Jewish Committee "to prevent infraction of the civil and religious rights of Jews in any part of the world".

Just one year later, the United States won its first Nobel Prize, and it was won by a Jew – Albert Michaelson.

From 1899 to 1914, U.S. government figures record 1,532,690 individuals arriving at Ellis Island and declaring themselves to be Jews.

A poor, bedraggled lot, only 7% had at least \$50 or more; 38% had less than \$50; and 55% had no money at all. 70% stated that they paid for their journey with money borrowed from relatives.

What were these immigrants like? In 1906, the British author H.G. Wells stated that he thought America was making a horrible mistake by admitting them. They would never, and these were his words, "be more than a semi-literate, urban peasantry."

On September 1, 1908, the New York City Police Commissioner, Theodore Bingham, raised a storm of protest charging New York's Jews with control of the criminal underworld, and stating that, although Jews constituted one-fourth of the general population, they made up one-half of the criminals.

Seventy years later, simple facts and numbers tell a different story. America's Jews make up under 3% of the population, but consistently win over 20% of the National Book Awards and Nobel Prizes, buy an estimated 25% of all "trade books" published in the United States and constitute nearly one-third of the incoming freshman class of every Ivy League college. The college entrance rate of American Jewish

youth is approximately 90%, compared with 40% for the nation generally.

This 3% of our population today includes the Secretary of State, Attorney General (of the U.S. as well as New York State), the Mayor of New York, the Chairman of the Federal Reserve Board, and the President of DuPont. The head of Notre Dame University not long ago openly asked a conference of Catholic educators, "Where are our Einsteins, Oppenheimers, and Salks?"

Yet our plays, books and poems, our folklore, and our comedians would still have us believe, as one observer put it as recently as 1960 that, "psychologically Jews are still in exile, marginal people with an undiminished sense of estrangement, an unbated sense of otherness." Writers still write of American Jews as aliens on the margin of culture, uprooted, displaced, persons who do not quite belong.

I maintain that the opposite is true. In America, where the majority consists of minorities, where each is free to follow his bent and seek fulfillment, the American Jewish community may emerge with a vitality, stability, and continuity unequalled in history.

It is up to us to make sure that our institutions, our customs, our traditions, and our mindsets are cast in such a way as to make Jewish continuity and survival not merely possible, but likely.

Using the resources of our synagogues, our Jewish community centers, our Hebrew educational system, and our nationwide charitable network, we must inculcate in succeeding generations not just the best of American tradition, but the best of Hebrew tradition: compassion and tzedaka, the love of learning, the sense of family, justice, and, above all, the sense of mission imparted by the Covenant of Mount Sinai.

If we succeed, we will produce finer Jews and finer Americans, but most important, finer human beings better able to lead satisfying, productive, and spiritually enriched lives.

In 1907, one year after the founding of Sinai Temple, Rabbi Israel Friedlander, a professor at the Jewish Theological Seminary, offered his fellow Jews a vision, and it is the ideal note on which I end:

“...when we thus try to penetrate the mist that encircles the horizon of the present, a vision unfolds itself before our mind’s eye, presenting a picture of the future American Israel. We perceive a community great in numbers, mighty in power, enjoying life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness...adding a new note to the richness of American life, leading a new current into the stream of American civilization; not a formless crowd of taxpayers and voters, but a sharply marked community, distinct and distinguished, trusted for its loyalty, respected for its dignity, esteemed for its traditions, valued for its aspiration, a community such as the Prophet of the Exile saw in his vision: ‘And marked will be their seed among the nations, and their offspring among the peoples. Everyone that will see them will point to them as a community blessed by the Lord.’”

Looking forward to the next 70 years, I pray that with luck and effort, our children and our children’s children may see his words come true.

*Sinai Temple, Mt. Vernon, NY
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