

What Kind of Jew Should You Be?

By Saul Brenner

The question, "What kind of Jew to be?" is not one for my father, who has been a practicing and believing Orthodox Jew throughout his 82 years. But it is a question that faces all Jews who feel free to choose the kind of life they want to live. And it is a vital question for the Jewish community, for the choices we make affect the survival of Judaism in America.

One can be a religious Jew. The Orthodox Jew believes that God handed down the Torah on Mount Sinai and a Jew has no alternative but to follow God's commandments. The Conservative and Reform Jews also believe in God and also claim that they have religious obligations, although a decreasing number of people who belong to Conservative and Reform congregations fulfill religious duties. Witness the small number of Conservative Jews who observe the Sabbath and eat Korsher food and witness also the small number of Reform Jews who regularly attend Friday night services. Perhaps this decline in observance reflects a decline in belief. We know from survey data that Jews believe in God less than their Catholic and Protestant neighbors. As early as 1965, 81% of the Catholics, 71% of the Protestants, but only 39% of the Jews were willing to affirm that "I know God

really exists and I have no doubts about it." And Jewish belief in life after death (17%) and in the Bible as an inspired book (17%) were also substantially lower. Thus, being a religious Jew may no longer be attractive to most of the American Jews.

A second kind of Jew one can be is the nationalistic Jew. Most American Jews have strong emotional ties to Israel, but the nationalistic Jew defines his Judaism in terms of these ties. Perhaps being a Zionist is a meaningful way of being Jewish for modern man. But it appears to me that if one is a serious Zionist one ought to make aliya to Israel; one ought to express one's nationalism in one's daily life and contribute directly to Israel. Yet most American Jews prefer the comfort of America to the challenge of Israel and, as a consequence, have rejected the nationalistic option.

A third kind of Jew is the social Jew. This Jew prefers Jewish friends, enjoys spending his free time with people who come from the same background as himself. But clearly this choice is not only dull but is a threat to Jewish survival. Our children will certainly inform us that they feel comfortable with people of different backgrounds and see no reason why they should not marry them and have children who are not raised as Jews.

One can also be an ethical Jew. One might argue that Jewish ethics is relevant to Jewish life and superior to the ethics derived from many other sources. But it seems to me that if one is serious about ethics one ought to adopt the most ethical position, whether that position has its origins in Jewish writings or not. And as a practical matter, most people who pride themselves as being ethical Jews pick and choose which Jewish ethics to adopt and which to reject.

There is, however, a way of being Jewish which may both appeal to modern man and have survival value for the future of

Judaism in America. That is, cultural Judaism. To be a cultural Jew one might have a knowledge of Jewish literature (both ancient and modern), an interest in Jewish music, art and dance, a mastery of Hebrew and perhaps Yiddish, a love of and support of Jewish life in Israel and in the diaspora, a willingness to help Jews in need, and a desire to participate in

Jewish ceremonies and observe basic Jewish values. To achieve these aims is demanding, but only goals that are difficult to attain are ever appreciated anyway.

How can we start to be serious cultural Jews? Soviet Jews, who seek to regain their Jewish heritage, learn Hebrew. Much of Jewish music is written in Hebrew. Our ties to Israel and to Jewish ceremonies are linked to Hebrew. And one cannot understand Jewish values without the knowledge of the sources from which they are derived. Indeed, learning Hebrew is not only crucial for being a cultural Jew, but it is necessary for being a religious, nationalistic, and ethical Jew as well.



New Appointments

Bob Bernhardt, president of the Hebrew Academy, has announced the appointment of Ann (Mrs. Bob) Abel and Patti (Mrs. Harold) Weisman as cochairwomen of the recruitment committee.

League of Nations

Two additional students have been accepted into the Academy's first grade class: Uzi Bar-Lev from Israel and Joel Cown from Scotland. The school also has at least one child from Canada, South Africa and the Soviet Union.

Miscellaneous News

The Academy received a gift of a copy machine from Stan Greenspon & Associates. This is a most welcome addition to the school.

Mrs. Eleanor Weinglass, interim director of the Academy, attended the six day Southeast Regional Havurah Conference held at Wildacres in late August. Mrs. Weinglass learned a number of techniques that she will introduce in the school.

The beginning of the school year has been exceedingly quiet and smooth. It appears that it will be a good year of learning.



Faculty, l. to rt.: Eleanor Weinglass, Shoshana Ravivi, Cookie Pollack, Arnel and Mitchell Greenberg at opening picnic.



Bertha Straz leading children in Hebrew songs. (photos/Mike Shapiro)

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