

THE SUBLIME VIRTUE

Burton Blatt

The content of one's reactions to questions concerning his religion should not be viewed as more than what they are, feelings, nor less than what we could reasonably expect them to be, revealing emotions and some conviction. Consequently, the details of one's reactions should not be camouflaged with the pseudo-scientific vocabularies too many of us are preoccupied with. What is about to be recorded simply is one person's examination of several questions, the central theme of all being: "In what way is the Jew in America different from other Americans and to what degree does he owe allegiance to Israel?". Put another way, the unstated, obviously crucial question asked is: "Are Jews in America intrinsically more akin to Israel than the country of their citizenship?". It is certain that the ways questions are asked elicit particular kinds of responses and there will be, in the minds of some, the feeling that the above questions are distortions of those we have been commissioned to attend to. It is even possible that some will feel that the above questions and reactions derogate the purpose of this symposium. As an apology, one might have said that any similarity between these remarks and eternal verities are completely coincidental. However, with all due modesty, it is hoped that: the part which is coincidentally true will, in some way, be revealed as such; that which appears authentic will be given due recognition; and that which is foolish will be forgiven. The writer assumes full responsibility for

his remarks; he consulted no authority, either personally or in the literature and has not sought advice from wiser minds who, in their wisdom, might have seriously discouraged him in his task.

When one thinks about American Jews and being Jewish, other than in ways practical, other than in ways relating to something one must do as a Jew or see as a Jew or eat as a Jew, it is not difficult to recognize that Jews are, in a particular regard, different from all other Americans. It is likely that European Jews and African Jews and Asian Jews equally share in this characteristic. One can not deny the rather meager possibility that, in ways too mysterious for geneticists to understand, the 46 chromosomes of the Jew induce the development of this characteristic indigenous to him. However, being more conservative, all that we are now prepared to say is that Jews in America, for one reason or another, are different from other Americans in that they are less able and/or willing to receive gifts, material and otherwise, and while this particular trait can usually be considered a virtue, insofar as the Jew is concerned we may think of it as a fault.

When at the Inauguration Ceremonies on January 20, 1961, President Kennedy enjoined his fellow Americans to "...ask not what your country can do for you - ask what you can do for your country", we can assume with a fair degree of certainty that, with few exceptions, our President was not speaking to Jews. It is not that we wish to imply that our President is prejudiced, quite the opposite. However, the old "chestnut", one man's medicine is another's poison, aptly applies here. In a nation accused of becoming soft, immoral and indolent, the President's message has particular pertinence. On the other hand, the Jew in America has, as an essential handicap, an

atypical desire to contribute and to serve. One need not peruse the literature too diligently to find such titles that bear the message of, "the Jewish Contribution to the world." In our youth, and it should be equally true for youngsters today, it was a delight and inspiration to read books concerning themselves with Jewish Contributions to sports and entertainment. To be sure, we can even find such prosaic works that extol the efforts of Jewish plumbers, manufacturers, and agriculturists.

It is rare when one reads or discusses at cocktail parties Contributions that Civilization, and America if you will, has made to the Jew. It is rare when we speak of Israel in terms other than the amounts American Jews have contributed to her. What has Israel given to us? What can she give if we were willing to receive? It is ironical that the more American Jewry gives to Israel the greater is their disdain and antagonism toward us, as witnessed by Ben Gurion's recent statements. But this is inevitable and could have been predicted. There are Jews in Israel too and they wish to enjoy the "naches" of giving. They want to give us their land, their nation, to share with some of us the pioneering adventure that we can never hope to participate in here. We view their gift with suspicion; we are hurt by their ingratitude; and we are self-compelled to send more money. This is the way American Jews operate. This distinguishes us from other Americans and may eventually drive us toward Israel, the one remaining place left on earth where the American Jew can possibly shed his neurosis to give. No doubt, if the Arabs were aware of this "disease" they would welcome the American Jew. If this "problem" is irreversible and indigenous to all Jews, the Arabs would eventually share in a significant "wind-fall" and may thereby solve most of their economic problems. Agifted

writer could develop a very funny story along these lines, centering on the U.A.A., United Arab Appeal (because no one else, in Israel would take the compulsive gifts of the American Jew).

This need to give permeates all facets of Jewish culture. Invariably, when the lists of philanthropic activities are tabulated in "Time Magazine" and other chronicles of our day, Jews and Jewish agencies lead the parade. Our synagogues are now the biggest and most beautiful and it is almost as if we equate giving with piety. In fact, on too many occasions, in synagogues and Jewish Centers, one can hear the familiar cry, "Give! Give till it hurts! Give!", ad nauseum. On one particular occasion a distinguished leader of a Jewish Community berated an individual because he questioned the necessity for the lavishness of a temple that was being built and he felt inadequate to offer the "proper" contribution for this construction. The "philanthropist" did not skirt the issue, "Today, religion is expensive. If you want to pray, you must pay".

I am disturbed by the concept of "pay as you pray" religion. I am offended by the thought that there are those among us who cannot give and are deprived, covertly and overtly, of an inalienable right, the right to worship with one's coreligionists. I am horrified to view the spectacle of the synagogue, the one place where all are equal before God, the one place where we can all receive - love, wisdom, compassion, humility - reduced to another arena for the practice to of our need to give, not the Lord's!

If what we say has validity, the field of psychiatry could, no doubt, offer cogent explanations for causes that give rise to the problem. In our own unsophisticated way, we probably could present interesting possible reasons for the situation through an analysis of

frustrations and injustices that the Jew has experienced in America and through the ages. There may be primary factors in his need to give and thereby to be loved. It is our impression that, not only do more Jews give more money to more worthy causes, but relatively more practice in the helping professions (medicine, psychology, ~~te~~ teaching, social work), more are associated with liberal causes, and more believe that the ultimate virtue is to give.

To be sure, there is greatness in the concept of giving and in being our brothers' keepers. However, giving should not be confused with unselfishness because one more often finds the need to give as a condition quite distinct from the merits of the philanthropy. There is a greater virtue than the virtue of giving. There is a supreme, a sublime virtue, that of receiving. By this, we do not mean ordinary receiving or taking; anyone can do that and need not be commended for ~~that~~. The virtue of receiving when there is no apparent need to receive, the virtue of receiving so that others may give is the sublime virtue.

Are Jews in America intrinsically more akin to Israel than the country of their citizenship? To the degree to which they are unable to accept help, to the degree to which they compulsively give, we should expect them to look to Israel as the source of their salvation. American Jews appear to be deeply distressed, having trouble manifested in the otherwise virtuous act of charity. It is possible that Israel will be the final solution of the "Jewish Problem"; that is, the problem that Jews have, not the problems others have concerning Jews. But, wherever and whenever and however the problem is resolved, there we will find a land capable of providing the Jewish people with the support and affection it must RECEIVE in order to develop the maturity to welcome all of the bounties and wonders of mankind,

even those accepted just so others may have the opportunity to give.

A great philosopher and friend once wrote that there is an "enrichment through difference". The joy and zest for living comes only through differences among us and to those who appreciate variations in life. It is my feeling that the greatness of the Jewish People emanates, to a significant degree, from the nature of their differences rather than from the extent of their similarities to other peoples. Some theologians tell us that the Jew was "chosen" to be different. It is not the intent of this essay to disparage that point of view; I am not recommending conformity for the sake of sameness. The road to mediocrity is paved with the sterile mind. The concept of uniqueness, of individuals and peoples, is of such magnitude and importance, that its very essentialness to mankind precludes our need to discuss it. However, it has also been said that we are made in His image; all men are brothers. While we are unable to accept a sameness as synonymous with brotherhood, it is equally impossible to view difference as the primary quality of Judaism. We have been the "Chosen People", to lead the world to one God, the Bible, and the Ten Commandments. Is it not time now for us to choose the role of beneficiary? There must be other people anxious and able to accept the role of benefactor to the human race or, at least, share it with us.