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PLAIN TALK

By Alfred Segal

Far up in the Academy on High, as it is called, solemn debate was going on among the sainted rabbis. They were, as is their unbroken practice, speaking about Jews, about Jews in all their varieties, about Jews and what to do to make them really Jewish.

In fact, in all the universe—whether on the earth or on the eminence of the Academy on High, there is no single group of people about whom there is so

much conversation as Jews. The conversation of those who don't like Jews and the conversation of those who like to say some of their best friends are Jews and the conversation of Jews themselves.

TAKE ANY CONVOCATION of Jews, such as poker, canasta or gin rummy, and shortly some one is bringing up the Jewish question as if it were something brand new, though of all the old angles.

So it is also, as is reliably reported to me, in the Academy on High whose campus takes in an immense area of paradise: as well it might, considering all the rabbis of all the times who have been admitted there for the further study of Jews.

This goes on forever. The particular Jewish subject of conversation that was agitating the Academy on High on the occasion which I am reporting was how to bring Jews back to the synagogue. Looking down from their immense height the rabbis were distressed to observe the

sparse population of synagogues on the Sabbath.

THIS WAS NOT ONLY THE distress of the rabbis of the strictly Orthodox persuasion but also of their classmates in the Academy, who had been Reform rabbis: for, as I should tell you, in the wisdom that prevails in the Academy on High the Orthodox brethren accept the Reformers as full brothers of theirs. Brothers, they say, who made a mistake but still brothers in the family of Israel.

So the great Orthodox gaon of the "Vina embraces the great Isaac M. Wise of Cincinnati" who was the founder of Reform Judaism, in the US, the founder of the Hebrew Union College, the founder of the Union of American Hebrew Congregation. He joined the Academy in the year 1901 after his burial in the Reform graveyard.

Such is tolerance as practiced in the Academy on High where, as I am told, nobody objects because Rabbi Wise doesn't bind himself in the phylacteries for the prayers of the morning; though to put on the phylacteries is the practice of the majority. They say Rabbi Wise is a brother in error and respects his heretical opinion on phylacteries anyway, and sit with him in the Academy's halls.

BUT TO GET ON WITH MY story which particularly concerns this Rosh Hashonah season, the rabbis of the Academy were looking into their own synagogues and observing that they were no longer as full of worshippers as in the times when they themselves were in authority in the congregation.

Yet there was not one among them to speak up in vanity on that account, to suggest that things were much better in the school when they themselves were in charge. For in paradise there is no vanity, not even among the rabbis of the Academy on High who have taken to themselves the wisdom of eternally.

As they were in their deep discussion on how to bring Jews back to the synagogue, one of them spoke up rather bitterly, saying: "Jews have become mostly Rosh Hashonah and Yom Kippur Jews. God, please forgive me for saying such a thing."

YES, HE SAID, MANY JEWS remember they are Jews only on high holidays. On those two days they hurry to the school, thinking to make up for all the days of their delinquency in the two days. Al, al, al, he sighed, and almost the whole Academy sighed al, al, al.

Then it was that Rabbi Isaac Wise spoke up... "My brothers, let us not hold the Rosh Hashonah and Yom Kippur Jew in contempt. Give him credit which is due him. Through all the year he wanders far from the synagogue. He is deep in his earthly affairs... His poker game... His concerns with getting his daughters married off right. He is far away from the synagogue

but he never forgets, never forgets who he is and what his duty is.

"HE REMEMBERS ON ROSH Hashonah. Thing of it, the man has been far away from his altar but he doesn't forget. In that season he remembers his duty to God and before God he looks into his soul and discovers the faults it contains: he speaks to God and considers ways by which to make himself more pleasing to the Almighty.

"My brothers, this is a rare man who wanders far but never forgets and in the due time always comes home. Let him not be sneered at but respected rather as a man who keeps sacred and never loses a noble memory."

THE ACADEMY NODDED its collective head and there was none to 'disagree' with Rabbi Wise. Then, with a wink in his eyes, Rabbi Elchanon Margolis who had been of Warsaw or maybe of Riga or, for that matter, of Kiev, arose and said:

"What the good brother has just told us reminds me of a Sabbath afternoon on which I and a half dozen of my Yeshivah boys were taking a walk in the streets of the city. And who do we see? Some distance away, coming toward us, we see a crowd of Jewish boys smoking cigarettes—on the Sabbath, mind you!

"My boys exclaim: 'Rabbi, look, Jewish boys smoking on the Sabbath!' "But even as I saw them, they saw me, and what did they do? Each of them snatched his cigarette from his lips and—lighted, mind you!—hid it in his pocket. "Then I said to my pupils: 'Consider how beautifully Jewish that was. Out of respect for me, out of respect for our religion these Jewish boys are willing to suffer fire by concealing their cigarettes in their pockets. They haven't forgotten their teaching. I say they are good Jews.'"

Merits Forgiveness The Rebbe Elimelech of Lizhensk was greatly troubled before Rosh Hashonah. "How can I come with a record like mine before God? I have transgressed so many commandments," he sighed.

In great distress the Rebbe began enumerating the sins he committed. Then he sighed a sigh of relief. "If that is the case, if my sins are so many," he whispered, "my broken heart will surely merit me forgiveness."

Borrowing To Give The rabbi and great scholar, Reb Hayim of Sanz, had a habit of doling out such charity on the eve of Sukkoth. And in order to be able to give as much charity as possible he would borrow money from Jews who sold exorim (citruses) for that holiday and therefore had extra money. One day his son said to him:

"Fahre, it is true that to give charity is a great mitzvah. But nowhere does it say that one must borrow money to give charity." "Oh, what do you want of me?" the rabbi of Sanz burst out in tears in reply to his son. "You know that you have a father who is without learning, who has't in him a drop of pity. Only one mitzvah he can fulfill—the mitzvah of giving charity. Do you want to take that, too, away, from him?"

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