

EXTRACTION, PERSUASION, OR WHAT?

David Philipson is a boyhood memory of mine. He reigned over Cincinnati's Rockdale Avenue Temple, a grand Grecian structure with a facade that read "MY HOVSE SHALL BE CALLED A HOVSE OF PRAYER FOR ALL PEOPLES." As a kid still learning to spell, those hewn letters were Uery Uery Confvsing. Just as was the lettering on a stained glass window that was certainly supposed to read "TRUTH IS THE SEAL OF G-D", but which always looked to me like "TRUTH IS THE SEAL OR COD." Maybe that explains my affinity for the ocean. Anyway, Philipson was a figure of solid dignity, with the uncovered white hair and close trimmed white beard of an assimilated benign patriarch.

He was more than the Senior Rabbi of Rockdale Temple. He was a kind of Senior Rabbi of American Reform Judaism, being the lone surviving member of the first graduating class of Hebrew Union College. In his day -- much more than a century ago now -- he entered rabbinical school at 18 with a high school diploma. That was before seminaries had become the academic mazes they are now. Through a long career, he distinguished himself for faithful service to the Reform cause, if not for deep scholarship, and he was indeed a spokesman for the viewpoints of his generation of American Reform Jews. Once I heard him identify himself as "an American of Jewish extraction."

That term stuck in my mind. Other groups in this country were generally described as Something-hyphen-American -- Italian-Americans, Irish-Americans, German --Americans, Mexican-Americans, Chinese-Americans, etc. -- but Jewish residents of this country were described in the press and in conversation as American Jews. A subtle difference, but important. The other identities made "American" the noun, the former nationality the adjective. Ours made "Jews" the noun, "American" the adjective. There was a message there: Whatever country we inhabited, whatever nation's taxes we paid or wars we fought or elections we voted in, we remained somehow alien.

Philipson would have rejected that image. So would many other American Jews. Better to be Jewish Americans.

One trouble with that term, though. Nobody picked it up. We are still known as American Jews.

The decades since I heard Philipson's line have seen contrasting waves of opinion on the subject of group identity. We had the 40's, for example. Officially we were told we were all finally equal. But lynchings still happened in the South. In the armed forces we were segregated. And as any World War II vet remembers, when we were asked "what nationality are you?" The answer "American" wouldn't do. At one Naval base I was on, a CPO calling the roll came across a name he couldn't pronounce and asked the recruit for his nationality. The young man said "American." "You know what I mean" snapped the Bos'n's Mate, "are you Jew or Wop or what are you?"

We had the 60's when Black was Beautiful, when it was in to be Ethnic -- and square to be American. It was also square -- even counter-revolutionary -- to be religious. Buying into those values, many young people -- and older ones too -- tended to stress the ethnicity in Jewish identity, and downplay the religious element.

Closer to today came the Baal T'shuva movement, bringing back religion to the foreground in the lives of a generation that had very little ethnic quality left. Essential to these returning Jews rediscovering their roots is the willingness to discard whatever American culture conflicts with Torah values. So for them at least, being "an American of Jewish extraction" is definitely not valid. And the Baal T'shuva movement influences American Jewish attitudes more than some liberals realize. It strengthens the stand of Orthodox separatism, on one hand.. And it makes non-Orthodox Jews aware of the fact that Torah has something to say about their lives.

Now a friend told me recently of an experience he had on a trip to the South. Someone there asked him if he was "of the Jewish persuasion." My friend replied that there was not much persuasion to it. When he was eight days old, they did a job on him and here he is!

Of course, the well-meaning Southerner phrased the question as if Judaism was a school of thought. A church to join or resign from. An opinion to adopt or abandon like changing a shirt. To anyone brought up Jewish, and to anyone who has chosen Judaism and gone through the rigorous preparation for becoming Jewish, that concept doesn't work either. In actual fact, you can be Jewish without being persuaded. And you can be persuaded without being Jewish.

Again and again, members of Israel's Knesset must argue the question "Who is a Jew?" They are asked to define it or re-define it to correspond with one viewpoint or another. Is the daughter of a Jewish father Jewish, if her mother is not? Is a male convert Jewish without a Bris? Without a visit to the Mikvah? Many non-Orthodox rabbis accept converts who are afraid of water. Or afraid of blood. Does the commitment their students make count for something? Should the Law of Return apply to them? Or should it be limited to those born of a Jewish mother or converted according to Halakha? Are Ethiopian Jews and their practices acceptable without either a mass conversion or individual immersion? What about Russian immigrants of mixed parentage?

These are loaded questions not only for Israel but for us in the Diaspora too. Are we Americans of Jewish extraction? Are we Americans of the Jewish persuasion? Or are we American Jews?

Perhaps we need our own Law of Return -- a path of return to Jewish basics. There definitely is such a path. For liberal and secular Jews as well as for Orthodox returnees. It remains for each individual to explore the path. Many synagogues and community centers offer classes in Basic Judaism. Outreach organizations like National Jewish Outreach innovate programs like "Shabat Across America," to reacquaint people

with the joys of Sabbath observance, and many similar experiences. Check them out on www.njop.org

Reform, Conservative and Renewal movements also offer programs to bring “wandering Jews” home. All you need is your own personal Law of Return.

Welcome home.