

THE PURPOSE AND PROGRAM OF THE
UAHC RELIGIOUS ACTION CENTER
DEDICATION ADDRESS DELIVERED BY
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One year ago this month, Reform Judaism determined to produce a child in Washington, after having made several abortive attempts. Three months later I moved to Washington -- conception had become reality. Now, nine months afterwards we are again gathered in Washington. What is the occasion? Appropriately, after nine months, the new child has been born -- the UAHC Religious Action Center. As is the custom of our people every Jewish boy must have a Bris -- "להכניסו בבריתו של אברהם אבינו", must enter into the covenant of Abraham our father." So from all over the country members of the Mishpacha and distinguished guests and friends have come to celebrate.

What is the Bris, the covenant which we have kept by creating the Religious Action Center? In Genesis 17:1, God prescribes for Abraham the nature of his covenantal obligation. " -- התהלך לפני ויהיה תמים " Walk before Me and be wholehearted. "

Our contemporary society is a bifurcated rather than a "wholehearted" society. How else can we describe the discrepancy between the unparalleled high status of religion and the unprecedented low state of personal and public morality? This bifurcation had been defined by Rabbi Robert Gordis as "un-political ethics" and "amoral politics." We have tended to become divided into two distinct spheres: the religious sphere, whose peace of mind, peace of soul, faith in faith, positive thinking orientations are unconcerned with the world outside the sanctuary walls; and the social, economic, political sphere, whose philosophies of "business is business" and "politics is politics" are unadulterated by ethical considerations.

By establishing the Center, we affirm the covenant made by God with all men of religion, which commits us to strive to walk before God not in a compartmentalized, half-hearted but in a "wholehearted" manner.

At a time when many citizens equate loyalty to the state with loyalty to God, when our society and nation have become the objects of idolatrous worship, when in the name of democracy the "self-evident truths" are denied and the "inalienable rights" perverted, we affirm the responsibility of religion to sharpen the critical perspective and to inspire the inculcation of those eternal moral values which are higher and nobler than the prevailing standards.

In this increasingly complex age, when it is at times necessary for government to extend its influence into areas formerly considered beyond its purview, we affirm our obligation to encourage the individual to preserve and enhance his individuality by actively participating in the social issues of his life and times.

In recognition that the most formative influence in the life of an individual is neither creed nor scripture nor pulpit, but the over-all social, economic, and political milieu, we affirm that religion can best affect the character of man by seeking to affect the character of man's environment.

In a society where men achieve their objectives by forming large-scale organizations, and where the person without a group has no forum in which to express himself, we affirm the right of religious groups to engage in collective action in order to implement their moral message.

In an age when many citizens view government with suspicion and the instruments of government with distrust, we affirm our responsibility as citizens to use the democratic processes of our government as an essential means of achieving a more ethical society.

Cognizant of the divergent theologies differentiating the various religious groups, we affirm that the fundamental division in American religious life is not between the faiths, but within each faith, between true religion and religiosity, between those who are activated by and those who are apathetic to religious ideals, between those who relate religion to life and those who use religion to escape from life.

By establishing our Religious Action Center, we affirm God's covenant with the Jewish people. Even though Jews as individuals have been in the vanguard of most social issues, Jewish groups have tended to confine their social action endeavors to efforts either directly or indirectly related to the minority status of the Jews. Until recently most Jewish groups have employed what I have called the "TV approach" to social action. We have selected our own channels of activity. We have chosen our own programs. We have adjusted the picture and we have expressed ourselves loudly or softly to suit ourselves. And all too frequently, we have turned our sets off and have not become involved as a group in the social programming of the world.

There are, of course, historical reasons for our selective dialing. Until the last generation, American Jews were engaged almost full time in a battle to attain security here and abroad. We organized agencies to acquire and preserve our civil rights and liberties and by extension we became committed to the struggle to secure rights for all minority groups. This struggle to equalize opportunity for all Americans in every phase of American life necessarily still consumes much of our time. But in the new, pluralistic America, with its dialogues and trialogues, our covenantal obligations require us to be conscientiously and zealously attuned to all the channels of social concern.

Our tradition has always emphasized unity: one God; one mankind; the integrity of one man is as important as the entire universe; no one individual can attain his personal salvation until there is salvation for all mankind; "the world rests on three pillars: on truth, on justice and on peace," and as our sages taught, "all three are one." All social issues are interrelated just as all men are interrelated. Political justice is inseparable from economic justice. World peace is inseparable from the attainment of an equitable

distribution of the world's material goods. A victory for truth in one part of the world is a victory for the justice and peace of the entire world.

We no longer live in the ghetto. We take our stance as free and equal partners. We no longer ask, "What will happen to the Jew if we engage in social action?" Instead we ask, "What will happen to the world if we do not engage in social action?"

By establishing our Religious Action Center, we affirm the covenant made by Reform Judaism. The founders of our movement declared that Judaism's moral laws were eternal while the ritual laws were evanescent. How tragic it would be if we, who claim to perpetuate their spirit, were to exclude the prophetic message from Prophetic Judaism. Shall we continue to debate a guide for ritual observance without at the same time debating guides for moral behavior and standards for society? Is there to be a Reform Jewish view - point on breaking the glass at weddings and not a Reform Jewish viewpoint on breaking the pattern of racial prejudice? Shall our congregations devote their energies to increasing membership dues and not to increasing concern for world peace? Shall we seek new means of attracting to the synagogue those who do not attend and not seek new means of having an impact on the lives of those who do attend? Shall we, who bitterly resented the silence of most of the churches of Nazi Germany, ourselves remain silent in the face of injustice and inequity in our society?

No, we answer. The purpose of our Religious Action Center, as of our Commission on Social Action, is to keep the covenant by walking before God in a wholehearted manner.

The program of our Religious Action Center is still in the process of being formulated. When a child is born, we look forward with "great expectations" to his future. Immediately following the circumcision, all those present recite a verse which epitomizes the good life we wish for him: כַּשֵׁם שֶׁנִּכְנָס -- לְבְרִיתָהּ כֵּן יִכְנָס לַחֶפֶז לְתוֹרָה וּלְמַעֲשִׂים טוֹבִים. "Just as this child has entered the covenant, so may he lead a life of study, may he make a good marriage, and may he perform good deeds." As we look toward the future of our Center, we hope that it will find its fulfilment in a similar three-fold program.

First, that it will lead a life of Torah, of study and research. In a recent report, college students characterized the social action efforts of religious groups in the following critical words: "The chief output of the churches today is preachers' pious platitudes and laymen's lame laments over even these platitudes." Even a cursory review of our social action resolutions will confirm the validity of this criticism as it applies to us. "Pious platitudes" do serve a limited purpose in adding our voice to the crowd. They do not serve the purpose of voicing the majestic heritage of Judaism. The distinctive character of Jewish ethics is its compulsive commitment to be specific. Our forefathers did not rest with the issuance of general moral pronouncements from the detached heights of Mt. Sinai. They descended into the valley of reality.

They compiled detailed guides to human conduct. Out of the Ten Commandments evolved the Torah's 613 commandments. From the Torah developed the Talmud, a record of the never-ending process of formulation and revision of moral principles in order to meet the changing needs of changing times. The passion to speak in relevant terms to the society of their day made of our sages experts in humanity.

If we in our day would be experts in humanity, then we also have to be relevant to the needs of our day. To be relevant means to be specific. To be specific means to recognize the complex nature of our society and of the problems which confront it. Many of the social issues of the past have been resolved and many of the reforms advocated in the past have been implemented. Two generations ago, the Central Conference of American Rabbis issued magnificent resolutions and our rabbis stood on picket lines in defense of the rights of labor. There was a clear moral issue involved in the fight to shorten the twelve-hour day, seven-day workweek. Today, the moral issues involved in the proposed 35 hour workweek are not so clear. The social issues of our day do not permit quick judgments or easy moral decisions. And as frequently as not, the decision must be based on technical knowledge rather than on moral perception. The advancing technology tends to concentrate more knowledge in the hands of fewer people. This imposes on us, as on all groups, the obligation to seek the advice and counsel of experts, and at the same time to develop our own corps of experts.

We cannot speak responsibly as Jews unless we speak in the spirit as well as in the name of Judaism. Yet, much of the rich store of Jewish ethics lies buried in biblical, rabbinic, and philosophic source. We must stimulate an effort to mine the treasure, to translate, collate, and interpret Jewish ethics in a manner which will make a distinctly Jewish contribution to contemporary social problems. The task of uncovering and applying the ethical insights of Judaism is an integral aspect of Torah--of study related to life.

The second aspect of our program -- "ל פ ה / ס כ נ ' -- may the newborn child make a good marriage." Judaism has always maintained that in order to fulfil the purpose for which he was created a man must marry and beget a family. We cherish the dream that our Religious Action Center will wed Judaism to a more intensive social justice program and will rear many disciples. The world of the future will be ruled by specialists, but the Jewish community of America is making insufficient plans for future needs, especially in the area of social action. For the most part our professionals are not adequately equipped. The rabbi possesses a good Jewish background, but receives little if any real training in community leadership, that aspect of his position to which he will necessarily devote much of his time. Under the pressure of an active ministry, the rabbi is unable to remain conversant with all the social issues or to learn how best to cope with them. The professional who is engaged by our various communal agencies may have some experience in community relations, but rarely has the Jewish background which could give content, purpose, and perspective to his work. The materials and programs disseminated by our Commission on Social Action and by other Jewish agencies gather dust in files unless there are professionals and laymen prepared to use them. Hence, we shall organize pilgrimages, leadership conferences, and training institutes on both a popular and intensive level for rabbis and other full-

time professionals and for lay leaders in the synagogue and in other Jewish institutions. The expanding social interests of Jews need the guidance and direction which can come only from trained personnel.

The third aspect of our program -- " מַעֲשִׂים טוֹבִים -- may our child pursue a life of good deeds." Most social action programs lack one essential element--action. Religious groups mistakenly assume that a resolution passed at a national convention constitutes action. The men responsible for guiding our nation are far too sophisticated in their own use of words to accept the words of others as a substitute for action. Our congressmen develop a set of political antennae which is more sensitive to the reactions of a few local constituents than to the most prophetically worded resolutions of the largest national religious organizations. The truth is that resolutions have greater impact on those who discuss and approve them than on the people to whom they are supposedly addressed. A pronouncement must be recognized for what it is--an educational instrument, a device for creating a climate of opinion, not an end in itself, but a means to an end.

To demand the right to preach to society without becoming involved in the society to whom we preach is to act irresponsibly. To issue commands from above, like Roman emperors, without entering the arena to become gladiators in the struggle for righteousness is to remove religion from society. Our resolutions, our Commission on Social Action, our Religious Action Center are tools in the do-it-yourself social action kit of our movement. In order to create anything at all of value, the tools must be used properly. There must be a clearly functioning process of action and interaction, of relation and inter-relation between our national and local institutions. The best way for us to be effective in Washington is to stimulate effective action in communities outside Washington.

As for our activities in Washington, may I set them in the proper perspective. There is a Persian fable about a fox who woke up one morning, saw the huge shadow of himself cast by the early morning sun, and became so impressed by his own image that he determined to set out immediately to conquer and eat the largest camel he could find. But by midday, the high sun of noon cast only a tiny shadow and the fox concluded that he would be very satisfied if only he could find a mouse to eat.

On this historic occasion, we should not bask in an exalted image of ourselves. Rather should we view ourselves under the harsh glare of realism and self-criticism. May I reassure those of our members who expressed fear concerning the large shadow of improper influence our Religious Action Center would cast over Congress and the Administration--we shall not devour any gigantic camels. May I confide to those of our members who expected us to conquer the hearts of Washington and quickly achieve an implementation of our views--we shall be fortunate if we can provide some small nourishment.

We have come to this pulsating center of our nation and our world to participate in humility. We have come not only to feed others, but to be fed by others. The members of Congress, government officials, and the host of non-governmental representatives are by and large men of capacity, integrity

and dedication. When we testify before congressional committees or express our views in other forums, our purpose is not to attack, but to contribute, not to detract, but to supplement, not to command, but to recommend.

We recognize that there are many unresolved questions concerning the proper function of religious groups in public affairs. There are risks involved in what we have done and in what we propose to do. There is an element of presumptuousness whenever any one or any group ventures forth to speak to others, to speak for others, to speak for the right, "as God gives us to see the right." But we live in an era of cataclysmic social change. The fate of our society and our world are determined by the decisions made by men. Whether we will it or not, we participate in those decisions. Either we participate consciously and responsibly, or we participate by silence and acquiescence. We intend to participate consciously and, we trust, responsibly.

The Book of Proverbs states, "יִסֵּר בֶּןךָ כִּי יֵשׁ חֲקוּהָ", Chasten your son, for there is hope." The Religious Action Center, the newest son of Reform Judaism, needs your love and care, but above all, we need your constructive chastenings, for where there is criticism, there is concern and growth and Tikvah--hope for the future of all men.

In this spirit, and with aspirations of making proud parents of our movement, I extend to all of you a hearty Mazel Tov.

