

13: R. Dr. J. B. Soloveitchik, *Message to a Rabbinic Convention*

if the Traditional Synagogue will base itself upon a single and firm policy toward Jewish observance, will the Synagogue and the Rabbi again become the great unifying and creative forces in Jewish life.

13

*Message to a Rabbinic Convention*

BY RABBI DR. JOSEPH B. SOLOVEITCHIK

I REGRET EXCEEDINGLY my inability to be at this most important conference of our organization. On strict orders of the doctor, I must not engage, for the time being, in public speaking, or even attend public functions. Please accept my heartfelt wishes for very successful and fruitful deliberations and discussions, which should in turn be translated into realities.

I also wish to express to you my deep appreciation of and admiration for your unselfish and untiring efforts in behalf of Torah and traditional Judaism. I know how much you have given to the cause of strengthening the orthodox rabbinate, to solidify its position and to promote its objectives. May the Almighty bestow upon you His infinite blessings and grant you health and fortitude to carry on your good work for many more years. The task is a difficult one; but the harder the mission, the greater is the reward. לפום צערא אגרא.

The Rabbinical Council of America stands now at the crossroads; and must decide either to assume boldly and courageously the time-honored, by-ages-sanctified role of the traditional rabbinate which traces its history back to Joshua, Moses and Sinai, and thus be ready to fight for an undiluted Halachah which is often not in the vogue; or to deteriorate into a so-called modern rabbinic group of undefined quality and of a

THE SANCTITY OF THE SYNAGOGUE / II

confused ideology, vague in its attitudes and undecided as to its policies.

In particular, I wish to call the attention of the Conference to the *mechitzah* problem. I continually receive reports from laymen from all parts of the country, accusing many rabbis of displaying indecisiveness and even cowardice in this matter. They charge them with laxity and indifference, even in cases when the traditionally minded individuals are willing to organize in defense of the principle of segregation. I have the feeling that a well coordinated, aggressive effort on our part may stop, if not reverse even, the trend of Christianization of the synagogue. However, many of our colleagues choose the *derech ketzarah va'aruchah*, the easy way which leads to doom and disaster.

I do hereby reiterate the statement I have made on numerous occasions, both in writing and orally, that a synagogue with a mixed seating arrangement forfeits its sanctity and its Halachic status of *mikdash me'at* [a Sanctuary-in-miniature], and is unfit for prayer and *abodah she-beleb* [the service of the heart]. With full cognizance of the implications of such a Halachic decision, I would still advise every orthodox Jew to forego *tefillah be-tzibbur* [group prayer] even on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, rather than enter a synagogue with mixed pews, notwithstanding the fact that the officiating rabbi happens to be a graduate of a great and venerable *yeshibah*. No rabbi, however great in scholarship and moral integrity, has the authority to endorse, legalize, or even apologetically explain this basic deviation. Any rabbi or scholar who attempts to sanction the desecrated synagogue, *ipso facto* casts a doubt on his own moral right to function as a teacher or spiritual leader in the traditional sense of the word. No pretext, excuse, *ad hoc* formula, missionary complex, or unfounded fear of losing our foothold in the Jewish community, can justify the acceptance of the

Christianized synagogue as a bona fide Jewish religious institution.

I know beforehand the reaction to my letter on the part of our apostles of religious "modernism" and "utilitarianism." They will certainly say that since a great majority of the recently constructed synagogues have abandoned separated seating, we must not be out of step with the masses. This type of reasoning could well be employed with regard to other religious precepts, such as the observance of the Sabbath, or the dietary laws. However, we must remember that an ethical or Halachic principle decreed by God is not rendered void by the fact that the people refuse to abide by it. Its cogency and veracity are perennial and independent of compliance on the part of the multitudes. If the ethical norm, *Thou shalt not kill* (Exodus 20:13), has not lost its validity during the days of extermination camps and gas chambers, when millions of people were engaged in ruthless murder, but on the contrary, has been impregnated with deeper meaning and significance, then every Halachic maxim assumes greater import in times of widespread disregard and unconcern. The greater the difficulty, the more biting the ridicule and sarcasm, and the more numerous the opponent—then the holier is the principle, and the more sacred is our duty to defend it. In my opinion, the Halachic dictum, *bishe'ath gezerath ha-malchuth 'afillu mitzvah kallah kegon le-shinuyeh 'arketha de-mesana, yehareg ve'al ya'abor* [at a time of religious persecution through governmental decree, even for a minor custom, such as one involving changing a shoelace, let one suffer death sooner than transgress it] (Sanhedrin 74b), requiring of us a heroic stand in times of adversity, applies not only to political and religious persecution originated by some pagan ruler, but also to situations in which a small number of God-fearing and Torah-loyal people is confronted with a hostile attitude on the part of the majority dominated by a false philosophy.

I call on the convention to make its stand clear on this problem, and to break finally with the policy of evading issues and employing ambiguities and inconsistencies. Matters have gone too far and have reached the state of cynicism, a thing which cannot be tolerated any longer. Let us not try to deceive the American Jewish laity by oral and written protests against deviationist rabbis, while many of our members attempt to emulate them. The American layman is by far more alert and intelligent than we are willing to admit, and we are gradually losing his confidence and trust.

I have perhaps expressed myself in this message a little too forcefully and bluntly. However, since the times of Moses we have known that harsh words are sometimes more expressive of deep sympathy and friendship than soft panegyrics. I realize your problems; I am cognizant of the temptations to which you are exposed; and I also know this should not blind us to our own mistakes. Soul searching, frank admission of errors, and *teshubah* are always in place.

## 14

### *On Seating and Sanctification*

BY RABBI DR. JOSEPH B. SOLOVEITCHIK

THIS IS THE QUESTION which has been raised: Lately there has been a great increase in the number of synagogues where men and women sit together. Many of them are attended by Jews who designate themselves as orthodox. Shall Orthodox Judaism then consider such synagogues as an inevitable development, and become reconciled to them? Or must it assume a militant stand against them?