

A Vituperative Attack Upon Reform

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In 1892 there appeared in print at New York City a Hebrew monograph entitled *L'Mazkeret*, consisting of six disjointed chapters on the general subject of Jewish religious life in the United States. The author of this work identified himself as Rabbi Bezalel Yevnin, a son of the late *gaon* Abraham Jonah Yevnin, of Grodno, Lithuania. Totalling a mere twenty-five pages, including the title page, an endorsement, and two more introductory pages, *L'Mazkeret* was published by Abraham Ginzberg at 158 East Broadway in New York.

The booklet's endorsement is rather noteworthy. Chief Rabbi Jacob Joseph, of New York, commends the author and extols the author's father as well as his uncle, but says hardly anything at all about the opus itself. The Chief Rabbi does allude indirectly to the "faithless sons," who in chapter four of Rabbi Yevnin's work appear clearly as the American Reform Jews.

This booklet is dedicated by the author to a then well-known bookdealer, Asher Lemil Germansky, without whose financial backing this work would most likely never have been published. In a foreword, which reads like a manifesto, Rabbi Yevnin states his intentions of putting in writing ideas he had already repeatedly presented in public addresses in various synagogues and houses of study. His message, he indicates, is directed to the Jewish immigrants who had quit Russia and Poland in recent years and had become engulfed by the tide of imitation and assimilation. He vociferously attacks the "traitors" among his own people who, by their assimilation, are grafting foreign branches in the vineyard of Israel.

Bezalel Yevnin's Hebrew is perhaps the poorest I have seen in a long while. It betrays a complete ignorance of basic elementary Hebrew grammar and a thorough lack of acquaintance with rudi-

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mentary principles of structure, style, or even common expressions. The author is not at all concerned about conveying his message to his readers; he is content with saying something that is sufficiently clear to himself, as his biblical references would substantiate. He undoubtedly was aware of his inadequacies in the Hebrew language, for on the last page of his opus he promises that in the future he will address his readers in Yiddish.

One cannot but wonder for whom Rabbi Yevnin wrote this work in his altogether practically unintelligible Hebrew. Certainly not for the masses of East European Jewry, who were his main concern, but who could not have understood *L'Mazkeret*. The average Orthodox rabbi, who could read it, would have been able only to sum up a general impression of a rather beclouded presentation.

After commenting on — actually obfuscating — Ecclesiastes 9:4–5 in his first chapter, Rabbi Yevnin in the second chapter bitterly laments the fact that new Jewish immigrants from Russia and Poland quickly abandon all religious interests the moment they set foot on the free soil of America. He compares the behavior of the Jewish immigrants to the behavior of the Irish and the Negroes and indicts the newcomers as desecrators of the Sabbath and the Festivals. They change their names and their language and frequently intermarry. He makes a quick transition from chastisement to an exhortation to observe all the minutiae of the Jewish faith and its commandments.

NOT ONE TO GUIDE HER

The author introduces his theme in chapter three by quoting Isaiah 51:18 — “Among all the sons she [Jerusalem] has borne, there is not one to guide her . . . nor take her by the hand.” He goes on then to decry the lamentable state of Jewish education among the recent immigrants from Russia and Poland. There is a complete absence of positive Jewish values. The secular education which the children of the new immigrants receive in the public schools has no moral value; it merely prepares these youngsters to earn a dollar, and even that at the expense of desecrating the Sabbath and defiling themselves with nonkosher food. The Jewish child, instead

of spending his time in the synagogues and houses of study, is exposed to the unhealthy environment of street gangs, from whom he acquires most undesirable traits. His playmates vilify him as a "sheeny," a "greenhorn," and a "Christ-killer."

The rabbi makes a very strong appeal to his readers to do something positive for the Jewish education of their children. Unless measures are taken for its improvement, the situation will be comparable to Isaiah 45:10: "Woe to him who says to his father: What have you begotten?" He quotes also tractate Berakhoth 32 which clearly states that these four concepts must be strengthened: learning (Torah), good deeds, prayer, and decent conduct. Self-education must precede the education of one's children, and thus create a chain reaction which will perpetuate itself. Again he emphasizes that the primary and basic element in the education of the youth is to rescue him from the coarse state in which he finds himself prior to his exposure to the ethical and religious teachings of Judaism. Rabbi Yevnin concludes with the rabbinic dictum that a parent who sustains and supports his children when they are young — educates them, and does not make them earn their livelihood — performs righteousness and justice all the time.

THE CONFERENCE IS WORTHLESS

Habakkuk 2:1 — "I will stand on my watch and set myself on the tower, and will wait to see what he will say to me and what I shall answer when I am reprov'd" — serves as the author's introduction to his chapter four. Rabbi Yevnin asks his readers whether they are aware of "the general assembly" (parenthetically he calls it "the synod") of "ignorant" preachers, rabbis, and "doctors," "curers of idols," which took place in the first week of the month of Tammuz, 1892, at Temple Emanu-El in New York City. He is referring, of course, to the July, 1892, meeting of the Central Conference of American Rabbis.

In alluding to the members of the Reform Central Conference, Rabbi Yevnin speaks of them not as רבנים (Hebrew for "rabbis"), but as רעבנים (a pejorative Yiddish transcription of "rabbonim") — he wants them thought of as "ra-bonim," evil sons, men who have

brought misfortune upon the teachings of Judaism and are content with a state of confusion and indifference. The Reform rabbis, he avers, have decided by majority vote that even an uncircumcised male is to be considered a full-fledged Jew.¹ Moreover, he says, they have approved intermarriage. In sum, he dismisses Reform as "deform," since the Reformers have destroyed the fence of the vineyard of Jewish faith. The Central Conference is worthless; the wind will scatter it. These "obstinate and arrogant" rabbis, lacking common sense and having no conception of the age-old sources of our religious concepts, neither the written nor the oral tradition, are undeserving of such titles as "reverend" or "doctor." They have no right to present themselves as religio-ethical preachers, because matters of theology, in the true sense of the word, are absent in the seminary of the elder of the apostates, "Itzik Laban" of Cincinnati and his entourage. "Laban" is, of course, none other than Isaac Mayer Wise² — who may be "white" (*Weiss*), but certainly not wise. Yevnin stresses that Wise arranged the Conference, was its head, and is, therefore, the chief architect of Reform's "cancerous movement."

The Conference, Rabbi Yevnin predicts, is bound to create a counterreaction among the truly faithful sons of the household of Jacob. The author cries out with the words of Habakkuk: "on my watch," I will stand on this watch of traditional religion, and I will place myself upon the tower of faith and I will look forth to see what Israel will say about the wide breach in its walls, and what I will reply in my disputation with those who seize our Torah. Our Orthodox rabbis keep silent; they restrain themselves and do not assert publicly that the Conference of the רעבנים is but a sect which is shaking the faith of Israel to its very foundations. These Reform rabbis, Yevnin maintains, have no right to speak about the faith of Israel and its nationhood. They are like non-Jews, as he

¹ The Conference, after carefully deliberating the question of *Milat Gerim*, the circumcision of proselytes, deemed the rite unnecessary by a vote of 25 to 5; see *Central Conference of American Rabbis Yearbook*, III (1892-1893), 36-37.

² The denotation of Laban is commonly understood to refer to לבן הארמי, not as LABAN the Aramaean, but LABAN the Swindler, the Deceiver, by a simple process of metathesis in the Hebrew gentilic adjective הרמאי to הארמי.

sees it, and he abhors their sons and daughters, their bread and their wine. . . . He is ready to do battle in defense of his faith. He has waited in vain for the Orthodox rabbis of America to rise up against the disease of the sage of apostates "Laban of Cincinnati" — a disease which has spread to frightful proportions — but finds no one to join him in the struggle to halt the spread of this "leprosy" in the body of American Jewry. He rebukes those who invite Reform rabbis to participate in the laying of a cornerstone or the dedication ceremony of a synagogue.

The Reform rabbis are preachers of falsehood; they impress the public with their Reform attire and their mastery of English; they cunningly flatter congregational leaders. These "Deform" rabbis, who tread on the platform of a synagogue, trample upon the values which are planted in the vineyard of Israel — should one not cry out loudly? "Be ashamed and reproved, ye heads of congregations in Israel, on the continent of Columbus, that your eyes do not see or discern the true state of conditions within your midst!" He appeals to congregational heads to appoint only true and faithful spiritual leaders and not those of the sect of destroyers (Reform). In his closing sentences he is not much more complimentary to the Conservative group than he is to his prime target, the Reformers.

THE DREGS OF HUMANITY

Chapter five, only a page and a half long, is Rabbi Yevnin's shortest and weakest. His topic here is hygiene. The presentation of this chapter is extremely poor, though the author wishes to leave the impression that he is an authoritative expert in matters of medicine and hygiene. The gist of his brief essay is that cleanliness is a safeguard for health and longevity. Non-Jewish physicians, he avers, have asserted that, as a rule, Jews are less frequently the victims of contagious diseases and epidemics. Yevnin ascribes this phenomenon to the fact that Kashruth, as prescribed by Orthodox law and ritual, is a dominant factor in their better than average state of physical well-being. He attacks and scorns Reform for abandoning Kashruth.

As a preamble to his sixth and last chapter, Rabbi Yevnin quotes

Haman's words in Esther 3:8: "There is a certain people scattered abroad and dispersed among the people in all the provinces of your [Ahasuerus'] kingdom, and their laws differ from those of all other people, nor do they keep the king's laws. Therefore, it is unprofitable for the king to tolerate them." His topic is anti-Semitism in the United States. Though, he says, the Constitution guarantees equal rights to Jew and non-Jew alike, time and again anti-Semitic articles appear in various American newspapers — the New York *Staatszeitung*, the Illinois *Staatszeitung*, *The Sun*, and several St. Louis newspapers. In Brooklyn, Jews were unable to walk the streets without being insulted by the "dregs of humanity," and at times were even attacked physically. The Jews then petitioned the Mayor of Brooklyn, Alfred Clark Chapin, to intervene and protect them in accordance with their rights. Such acts of violence were common also on Long Island and in New Jersey. Yevnin denounces the proud and arrogant Yankees, who befoul the air with their chewing tobacco and who take a hypocritical interest in their societies for the prevention of cruelty to animals, but show no concern whatsoever for the poor and wretched Jewish immigrant peddlers.

He now turns to a bitter attack on Reform, whose advocates he accuses of proclaiming themselves an ethnic group dissociated from Jewish nationalism in the hope of being accepted and tolerated by the dominant American majority. These Reform Jews, Yevnin asserts, continually insist that they are in every respect similar to the wide majority of non-Jews, and that they have the very same *Weltanschauung* with regard to both material and spiritual matters as the Gentiles. They incline toward assimilation by discarding their own language, changing their names, and completely abandoning every Jewish ethical and religious custom. Yet, in spite of this loyal profession on the part of the Reform group, anti-Semitism heaps upon us Jews the guilt of distrust in the American political system. Anti-Semitism strives to banish the Jews from its midst, and is bent on denying them a foothold in its viable community. In sum, Rabbi Yevnin, reviewing the general religious condition of the immigrant Jew in America in 1892, accuses Reform of being a strong contributing factor in the trend toward assimilation and the disintegration of Jewish values.

There is pathos and frustration in the rabbi's critical observation. His concern for the preservation of traditional Judaism is, of course, genuine, but one cannot help questioning the efficacy of his vituperative assessment of Reform, its goals and objectives. By placing all the guilt upon Reform, which he uses as a *שעיר לעזאזל* (a scapegoat), Rabbi Yevnin vicariously atones for the shortcomings of Orthodoxy. By denouncing the Reformers, he seeks to excuse the Orthodox for their inability to stem the tide of secularization and assimilation among Jews at the close of the nineteenth century in the New World.

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