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"THE LEANING JEWS OF AMERICA: A Sermon on Posture"

1. Those of us who attend services regularly know that amongst the many other aspects of Prayer, one of the important features is: Posture. And the various forms of posture we assume have their significance.
 - *Standing: as in the Amidah, a sign of respect for and honoring of G-d.
 - *Sitting: as when drinking the Kiddush or eating the Motzi, a sign of relaxation while participating in the happy occasion of Se'udas Mitzvah
 - *Lying: as when reciting the closing prayer of the day, the Shma to be recited in bed.
 - *Kneeling and Bowing: as in the Aleinu, or at the Modim in the Amidah, a token of our humility and our submission to the Divine Creator.

2. One particular position, however, is never required by the Law, and that is: LEANING. As a matter of fact, it is clearly forbidden. Thus, the Law insists that during the praying of the Shmoneh Esrei one must stand straight and beware of leaning against anything. *And yet, it seems to me that the characteristic pose, the typical religious posture of American Jews is - leaning. *Please forgive me and not regard it as frivolous if I ask you to join me in an analysis of this tragi-comedy of American Jewry's religious posture. It sounds humorous but, as is often the case, conceals a terribly serious situation.

3. "LEANING" is a position which manifests itself in 2 ways: forward-backward, and left-right. We Amer. Jews, it seems, indulge in both - and simultaneously!

4. First, we LEAN OVER BACKWARDS. We put ourselves into ridiculous, vulnerable, self-effacing and obnoxious positions in order to placate our non-Jewish friends and neighbors who either do not care one whit or who laugh at us, and properly so, for our foolishness.

Let me give you some unfortunate examples of this tendency to lean backwards. A recent issue of an Anglo-Jewish weekly has brought to light an interesting event in American-Jewish history. About one hundred yrs. ago, the Gov. of So. Carolina issued a Thanksgiving Proclamation which was unusual in that it called upon the citizens of that state to repair to their churches and thank and worship the Savior of Christianity. Even after it was pointed out to him that there were Jews in that state, and that they were citizens who were equally loyal with the rest and could not in good conscience do so, he refused to withdraw or change his proclamation. Thereupon, the tiny community of Jews served public notice of their refusal to acknowledge the proclamation and that year they completely ignored Thanksgiving. Thus the Jews of So. Carolina 100 yrs ago maintained the dignity of their religion and defended a basic American ideal. It never occurred again.

I can just imagine if someone would recommend such a course if that had occurred in this city this year. Such an insistence would have been branded as trouble-making, fanatic and un-American. I say that advisedly. For just compare the action of the So. Carolinian Jews to the reaction I received two months ago to several articles I published in our Bulletin condemning the parents who allow their children - Jewish - to participate in Christmas plays and songs, and so on, which are practiced and encouraged in our Public Schools. At least half a dozen parents objected to my views strenuously. One sincere young man challenged me with the remark, "Not after all, you're living in America, not in the Ghetto", as if we must expect more religious freedom and democracy in the Ghetto than in the USA. One Jewish teacher, the report came to me, commented that it was too bad for that Orthodox Rabbi. "He should realize that this is a Christian country. And what is all this, if not a sign that we are bending over backwards...and dangerously far...so much so that we are beginning to see things upside-down."

Another such case is even more heart-breaking. In New York, this last while, there has been a tremendous to-do about a Jewish Hospital which was opened on Long Island. The plan was to have it completely non-Kosher. More fashionable and avant-garde, you see. Finally, after extended pressuring and influence-exerting of all sorts by all kinds of Jews, the Directors relented half-way. They announced that they would ALSO provide a special kosher-kitchen for patients requesting such service. I might add that at about the same time an Episcopal Hospital - St. Luke's - announced that IT was opening a special Kosher Kitchen as a gesture to Jewry's religious inclinations. How ironic!

I could mention dozens of other such cases - ad infinitum and ad nauseum. I should speak to you about this "non sectarian" neurosis, which seems to be a special kind of Jewish self-hatred, a Yiddishe Meshugaas. I could mention the disgraceful episodes in the current Centenary celebrations - but that we leave for some other time.

Meanwhile, we may say, and without risking the charge of facetiousness, that some of us American Jews seem to be the only people in the world who are so versatile, that we can bend over backwards and manage to fall on our faces.

5. The second form of leaning which has affected and infected us is the LEFT-RIGHT leaning. Our Jews just don't know where they stand, and so they don't stand - they lean, right or left. It so often happens that a fellow-Jew will approach me and say, "You know, Rabbi, my Rabbi in my place is Conservative but he leans to Orthodox." or: "My Temple is Reform leaning to Conservative". or: My Synagogue is Orthodox leaning to Reform. It is almost impossible nowadays to find a religious organization which knows what it wants and proudly stands for something. Most of them do not. Rather, they lean - a bit to the right, or a bit to the left. The Jewish press recently carried an announcement by one temple in the Mid-West which termed itself "Progressive Orthodox". It seems to lean in both directions at the same time. Even more ludicrous is the frequent case of a Conservative temple which in its main hall has mixed pews, organ, and so on, in other words: it leans to the left. But downstairs, in the vestry, there is a small Orthodox Minyan - where it leans to the right. It is a Temple, therefore, which is an architectural freak: upstairs it leans left, downstairs it leans right. Abe Lincoln, whose birthday we celebrate tomorrow, would repeat his prediction concerning a house divided against itself. And may I admit that we of Kodimoh are not completely free of guilt and fault in this matter - and some good self-criticism won't hurt us.

What does this leaning-sickness indicate? It indicates wavering allegiances, uncertainty of ideals and shaky convictions. It indicates that our religious orientation is not the result of true conviction, but rather the resultant of a clash of such factors as sentiment, loyalty to parents, social climbing, childhood nostalgia, and a beautiful building. That is not what should count in religion - which is the facing of Man to G-d, and which should be stripped of such superficialities.

What then should be the case? We must stand straight. In Torah we recognize no leaning. Leaning can at best be considered deviation from G-d's will. When we bestow the honor of an Aliyah upon someone and call him up to the Torah, we call "YAAMOD", let so-and-so STAND UP. In Torah there is only standing up - proud of the heritage which is Torah, and without leaning to the idols of the day.

Perhaps we can find the root of this disease in the laws of - kashruth. Yes, in the laws of what constitutes TREIFAH. Certain kinds of animal disease or injury, as you probably know, make an animal ritually unfit for use, and such animal is called TREIFAH. These laws are frequently very complex. One of them deals with the problem of injury to the animal's spine. And the test of whether it is kosher or treifah is to hold the spine at the bottom in the hand and to look at it: if it leans over to the side and does not remain erect, it is treifah - for it is a sign of an injured, weak backbone. What is true for animals is, in this case, true for humans. The test for genuineness in a Jew, whether

one is a kosher Jew or not, is to see whether he leans - frontwards-backwards or left-right. If he does, it is a sign of weak backbone, of spinelessness, and he is not an authentic, genuine, thinking and discriminating Jew. If he doesn't lean, if he is YAAMOD for Torah, then he is kosher - kosher in spine, in heart, in mind and in soul.

6. Allow me to read to you this short and quaint poem by Ella Wheeler Wilcox on this matter of leaning.

There are two kinds of people on earth today,
Just two kinds of people, no more, I say,
Not thr good and the bad, for 'tis well understood
That the good are half-bad and the bad are half-good...
No! the two kinds of people on earth I mean
Are the people who lift and the people who lean.

7. Yes, that is our difficulty. We are leaners, not lifters. A beautiful legend related by our ages concerning the Ten Commandments we read tomorrow, tells us that at that momentous occasion in history the lame were healed, so that they would not have to rely upon their canes. What CHAZAL meant, it seems clear, is that when it comes to Torah, to religious conviction and living, you must not rely upon anything - not even a faithful cane. Rather, we must be lifters - for as the same legend relates, that at the moment the Word pronounced the first of the ten, PARCHA NISIMASSAN SHE'L YISRAEL, their souls departed from their bodies, so uplifted were they. To lift, to be uplifted, that is Judaism - not to lean.

8. Allow me to conclude with what I think is the only legitimate exception to our insistence upon a policy of no-leaning. And that is an expression frequently used by thr abbis of the Talmud: EIN LANU LE'HISHA'EIN ELA AL AVINU SHE'BASHAMYIM - we can lean upon no one - - - except upon our Father in Heaven.