

WHERE THE JEWS FAIL

by **Maurice M. Feuerlicht**

FAR BACK IN THE DIM recesses of my childhood memory there burns the recollection of knowledge -- gleaned from many sources available to alert childish ears -- that I was Jewish. More than that, I learned from countless dinner-table discussions and from my father's heated debates with evening callers that, somehow, Jews were different from other people and that there was a "Jewish problem."

Through the years I heard much and read more about this "problem" and so I became keenly aware of the fact that, for some reason, the Jews are a people apart from their neighbors. As personal experience added the judgment of maturity to vicarious knowledge, two unfortunate facts became increasingly apparent.. First, Jews as a group do not act like normal people, and by "normal" I merely mean the majority of citizens. Second, nobody can make an honest effort to probe the secret of Jewish differentiation, lest his head figuratively roll in the sand.

Jews, as a rule, are hypersensitive on the subject of their Judaism, even though they may never be quite sure just what their Judaism is. Consequently, Gentiles dare not discuss the topic in the light of healthy, helpful reason, lest they be accused of "prejudice." On the other hand, for many reasons, few Jews care to risk the storm of indignation sure to break on the head of any member of the group so rash as to express a sentiment other than bitter complaint against Jewish persecution by the world at large. The cry of "Renegade!" is not pleasant in sensitive ears.

Before I commit myself, I too want to forestall some of the criticism I may receive, by pointing out that as the son of a rabbi and the product of a Jewish environment I am hardly prejudiced against Jews. Regardless of the nature of my own peculiarly personal religious views, I shall speak of "we Jews" throughout my discussion, in order to make it perfectly clear that I have no desire to avoid being known as a Jew.

I do not believe there are any Jews at birth. The Jewish consciousness is given seed and cultivated consistently, however, from the moment the young Jew is capable of understanding the spoken word -- perhaps before that. Every religious experience thereafter tends to remind him that he is not like his friends the Gentiles. Such was my own experience, which may be taken as typical in that I was raised with less than the usual orthodox Jewish inflexibility but with more training than that found in most Reformed Jewish homes. My earliest memory is the celebration of the Feast of Lights, or Hanukkah. I sat at my father's feet, as have countless other Jewish youngsters, and heard him tell the thrilling story of Judas Maccabeus and his brave band who risked their lives for their religion. Each year at Hanukkah. I lighted candles in commemoration of the release from the oppressor's hand and sang:

Children of the martyr race
Whether free or fettered,
Wake the echoes with your song
Where ye may be scattered.

Along with my Jewish playmates, I had that theme, "children of the martyr race," dinned into my consciousness so deeply that it became a part of my very being, a basic element of my emotional and mental life. Almost the first words I understood, were oppressed people, martyrs, prejudice persecution. When little Gentiles called me "Jew," my parents carefully explained that the boys meant to insult me, that the world didn't like Jews and I should be like Judas Maccabeus. I quickly learned that, for some reason, the world had it in for me, and my home instruction never allowed me to forget the past. I had a long training in martyrology, taught with all the subtle and sublimating refinements that 3,000 years of bitter experience brought to the instruction. Wise Alexander Pope once wrote:

'Tis education forms the common mind,
Just as the twig is bent, the tree's inclined.

MY ABNORMAL HERITAGE

Scientists have a maxim, of forbidding sound, which declares that "ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny." Translated roughly, it means that the physical life history of the individual follows the life history of the race. This is true in fields beyond the physical and biological experience of the race. Vicariously, every good little Jewish youngster suffers the pains of persecution which have been visited on his group. After Hanukkah, I celebrated Passover and hated Pharaoh with all the fervor of my childish heart because he persecuted the Jews. Lest I forget the hasty flight through the Red Sea, I ate unleavened bread, matzoth, to remind me of hardship suffered 2,000 years ago. When Purim came, I hated Haman and hissed his name because he wanted to exterminate the Jews. At Friday-night synagogue services I heard my father roll out, in thunderous terms, indignant complaints against the "hand of the oppressor" and I heard him speak with pride of Jewish survival after "three thousand years of persecution."

In Sunday school and at home, while other little children learned fairy tales and played with tin soldiers, I learned of the bloody pogroms of Kishinev; I quailed at the tortures of the Spanish Inquisition; I resented deeply the Jewish confinement to the ghetto and the pale; I read of the distinctive clothing forced on the Jew; my blood boiled at the accusations of the "Protocols of Zion" -- charges of Jewish sacrifice of Christian children, Jewish schemes for world power. With all other Jewish children, I had a vicarious but none the less realistically sordid childhood and, like them, I emerged, without realizing it, a first-class case of mild paranoia. I knew the world had a grudge against me. As I grew older, this persecution complex grew stronger. I did not learn a great deal about the religious principles of Judaism but I certainly knew all about the Dreyfus case, the Ku Klux Klan, the "numerus clausus" restricting Jewish college quotas, country-club and hotel restrictions. That knowledge, more than anything else, constitutes the Jewish consciousness we have today. Can it be said that we Jews are normal? We are more

conscious of our maltreatment than we are of our religion itself. This martyr complex has its origin in history and its growth in our social relations. No one denies the injustice of it or the reality of its existence.

Let us concede past injustice, let us concede our martyrdom, but let us do more than this: let us consider the unfortunate effect we Jews produce when we interpret the events of daily life in terms of the past history of our group. When we constantly think of ourselves as Jews first and then as individuals, can we wonder that the world accepts our perverted sense of values? That twisted conception may be understood easily in the light of brutal history, but its effect on each of us is no less devastating. It is with the effects of our persecution complex, rather than its causes, that I am concerned.

"PREJUDICE" AS AN ALIBI

The martyr complex makes us abnormal in dealing with our neighbors, first of all, because of its effect on us as individuals. There are few Jews who have been penalized in some way by society for personal shortcomings who have had the courage to admit that the fault might rest within the compass of their personal make-up. A man's vanity is a precious thing; without it, his poise and self-assurance are gone, his morale is shattered. He must preserve his vanity or live up to it, at all costs. It is true of human nature generally that men seek the blame for failure everywhere but at their own doorstep. This is a common rationalization for the purpose of preserving our worth in our own eyes.

How perfectly normal, then, is the Jew who fails to get a job or make a club or sell an order, because he falls below the personal standards required for success in his particular endeavor, and who says, "They were prejudiced; it was because I am Jewish." We diverge from the normal when this becomes a mental habit with which we constantly salve the wounds of all our failures; then the fault ceases to be normal and becomes a persecution complex.

We Jews should give less attention to Shakespeare's Shylock and more consideration to his Cassius, who said:

The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars,
But in ourselves, that we are underlings.

The use of an alibi to hide personal deficiency usually begins early in life. I recall that in school our teacher gave a generous discourse on the Jews, using as a text the character of Rebecca in *Ivanhoe*, which we were studying at the time. During the class, Mose Levy was called on for recitation. Having neglected to study, he tried to bluff but failed miserably. The next day I was called to the office of the principal of the school to testify on behalf of the distraught teacher, whose job was imperiled by the highly-indignant mother of Mose. The youngster had told his mother that Teacher hated him, and "picked on" him because he was Jewish. He had been humiliated in class. Teacher had said very unkind things about Rebecca. Mrs. Levi demanded that the embarrassed principal discharge Teacher for maltreating her brilliant and long-suffering Mose. Teacher nearly

lost her job because the principal did not care for the publicity attendant on a hearing of the unfounded charges, if brought before the school board. Teacher was transferred, and Mose showed up in class a week later, grinning impudently at the new instructress I went to a prominent Eastern college, and my four years there mean more to me than anything that has yet occurred in my life. I had several informal talks with the dean about Jewish students. He pointed out that fifteen per cent of the entire student body were Jewish, yet the college had been charged with discrimination in admissions. Several distinguished members of the faculty were Jews, and one was serving on the board of admissions. The dean cited many examples where the administrative officers and the faculty had leaned over backward to be helpful to their Jewish students. Yet I saw on his daybook that an astounding number of Jewish parents had made equally astonishing charges based on an assumption of prejudice, usually because their sons had failed to make a team, a fraternity, or an office or had failed a course of study.

Please remember that I am speaking of these particular boys and many like them when I say that I knew from daily contact that they were a lot of dirty, greasy, uncouth, unmannered, lazy, spoiled youngsters who constantly carried a chip on the shoulder -- who would have been just as completely undesirable if they had been Presbyterians or Confucianists and who were ignored by their fellow Jews. They felt that the world had set them apart for perpetual social persecution and consequently carried a grudge against everybody. Their minor successes were due to blackmail; the college authorities gave them more consideration than any other students, for fear that some morning the world would awaken to read charges of flagrant discrimination rampant in the very home of the truth and the light.

JUDAISM -- RELIGION OR REFUGE?

An infinite number of examples could be given, covering every phase of life and every type of Jew. Examples are only cumulative in effect and afford no fair basis for generalization. The principles on which they are founded still apply generally. There are many, many cases of actual prejudice. This does not obscure the fact that too often the prejudice ascribed to race and religion is a completely justified personal one, or else it is imagined; that even where real prejudice does exist it is frequently due to incidents for which the Jew is largely responsible and where he is the first to inject the issue into the case.

Strange though it may seem, most Gentiles are human beings and are fundamentally fair-minded. They think in terms of individuals and judge individuals on their own merits. To the majority of Gentiles, what a man thinks of God and what he does on Sunday are private matters belonging to the class of nonessentials as far as the activities of the market place are concerned. Gentiles don't like to talk about the "Jewish problem" because they recognize that it casts a rather shadowy reflection on their sense of fair play. It is the Jew with the chip on his shoulder, the martyr complex, who creates false issues and makes Gentiles dread him.

I believe we Jews will never be normal individuals so long as we maintain and foster our martyr complex, so long as we remain shy of self-appraisal and self-improvement, and so long as we find it easier to blame the other fellow for our own faults.

This, briefly, has been the effect on the make-up of the individual Jew of his martyr complex. His perpetually outraged sense of justice also affects his attitude toward Judaism. He proudly embraces his religion as a protest and not as a conviction. ("What if I am a Jew? I'm proud of it!") When a Jew is blackballed by a club, when a Hitler unleashes his fanatic fury, or when the Ku Klux Klan corners the nightshirt market, the Jew bumps his head against reality and recognizes that, even though he may never go to Temple, he is still a Jew as far as the world is concerned. He returns a little closer to the fold because of the external stimulus. Judaism may be preserved by such pressure from the outside, but its vitality must grow from within. Too often it is the martyr complex that makes a Jew come back to Judaism. While he may be an ardent Jew because the world persists in reminding him of that fact, he is not an intelligent Jew and is therefore only a quantitative, rather than a qualitative, asset. Neither Judaism nor its adherents