

Rabbi Eliezer Silver

זכר צדיק לברכה



American Jewish life has become departmentalized. There is the rosh yeshiva and mechanach who teaches Torah to our children; the rav who answers shaylos; the rabbi who ministers to his congregants; the executive who is concerned with rescue and philanthropic efforts; and the executive director and fund-raiser who supplies our yeshivos with the funds to meet their ever-growing needs. Rabbi Eliezer Silver, זצ"ל, who died in Cincinnati last month at the age of 87, carried all of these responsibilities throughout a long and productive life which radically altered the American Jewish scene. Rabbi Silver, in his dedication to Klal Yisroel, made no distinction between any of the great spectrum of klal needs and concerns which confronted him as a rabbi in Israel. Whether it was a yeshiva that was

floundering under financial burdens, or a single Jew who needed help, he brought to bear the same Ahavas Yisroel which reached its apex in his monumental rescue work for European Jewry, which literally snatched thousands of souls from certain death.

And the same driving force, and the same seemingly boundless energy which motivated Rabbi Silver in his dynamic leadership, propelled him into a greatness in Torah learning achieved by few rabbis on the American scene.

Rabbi Eliezer Silver was twenty five years old when he came to America, and shortly thereafter became the Rabbi of Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. He had already reached a high degree of *lomdus* before coming to America, having been a talmid of the sainted R' Chaim Ozer Grodzensky, זצ"ל; but he continued to pursue learning throughout his career as a rabbi. In Harrisburg, the energetic young rabbi who was concerned with the well-being of every Jew in his community, for twenty five years spent hours of every day and night, sitting in the shul's Beis Medrash and learning in a loud voice, as though he had never left the yeshiva. And he had to explain one day to some of the balebatim, that it is the prime responsibility of a rabbi in Israel to learn. They may not have understood at first—"Doesn't a rabbi already know everything?"—but his dedication to his people explained more eloquently than words, the power of Torah learning.

Within a short time, Rabbi Silver became a powerful force in the Agudas Harabonim, respected by rabbis two- and perhaps three-times his age. He demonstrated the leadership qualities which later gained him the respect of senators and cabinet members and presidents, when he served on a delegation representing the Agudas Harabonim which met with President William Taft. For decades, his close relationship with the Taft family, served him well in his constant interventions on behalf of Jews throughout the world.

Rabbi Silver quickly rose to a position of leadership in the Agudas Harabonim, and for forty years served both as president and presidium member, making tremendous contributions to the organization and to the status of the rabbi in America, while at the same time serving as rabbi of Cincinnati, Ohio, and breathing new life into that community.

In 1937, on the eve of the Third Knessia Gedola of Agudath Israel, Rabbi Silver received a request from his Rebbe—R' Chaim Ozer—in Vilna, urging him to attend the Knessia. At that time, Agudath Israel was yet to become a national force in American Jewry, and

Reb Chaim Ozer had singled out his brilliant talmid to raise the colors of Aguda on American soil. When Rabbi Silver returned from Marienbad, he convened a conference of rabbis and laymen, and established Agudath Israel of America, which he served with his dynamic leadership until his last days.

His leadership of American Jewry would itself have earned for Rabbi Silver a place of honor in the annals of modern-day Jewry. But the dark clouds which covered Europe in the forties projected him into leadership of rescue efforts which dramatically demonstrated the combination of Ahavas Yisroel and personal dynamism which was at the core of his being. Rabbi Silver expressed his philosophy of the rescue work in these words:

The fate of the Jewish people has a two-fold

meaning: rescue of the Torah and rescue of the Nation. One hinges on the other and the two cannot be separated. This is the view of the Torah and this is the foundation of Halacha—and the laws concerning the saving of life are clear and well-known to us all.

It was this Torah approach to the saving of lives that not only motivated Rabbi Silver and his loyal co-workers; it was also his guide in determining the techniques of rescue. It was this approach which made it possible for the Vaad Hatzalah, organized and led by Rabbi Silver, to effect the rescue of thousands of Jews, where other groups had failed.

(A report of the historical rescue operations initiated by Rabbi Silver through the Vaad Hatzalah will appear in our next issue.) □

A Letter to the Editor

In Defense of Assimilationism

To the Editor:

As an historian, Rabbi Raphael Weinberg should know, perhaps better than anyone else, that attempting to prove general principles from history, even Jewish History, is a rather hazardous enterprise. The "deeds of the fathers" can serve as "signs for the children" only because their history was prophetically recorded. Furthermore, this principle strictly speaking, applies only to the Patriarchs, which according to the Talmud is a name to be given to three and only three personages. For periods following the Patriarchal age and particularly for those epochs where no prophetic account exists, we are in the same boat as the general historian whose conclusions usually suffer from two disabilities: • he can never really be sure that he is in possession of all the relevant facts to be able to determine the cause of a particular event; • his interpretation may be a mere tendentious application of an a priori bias which he brings to his study of history rather than infers from it.

LET US CONSIDER this last point first. Rabbi Weinberg begins by considering what he calls, "two basic responses to the challenge of Jewish survival—the isolationist and the assimilationist," the former typified by the East European Jew and the latter exemplified by Spanish Jewry during the Golden Age. He claims that the fact that Spanish Jewry, in the main, when put to the supreme test became Marranos while Ashkenazic Jewry accepted martyrdom, shows that the Judaism of the latter "was more potent." This is supposed to prove that isolationism is good and assimilationism is bad. I should like to ask Rabbi Weinberg if we can imagine as a result of some startling new discovery it was suddenly shown that Spanish Jewry *did* opt to die *Al Kiddush Hashem*, would he be prepared to change his judgement and accord assimilationism equal validity? I doubt it very much. I would guess that he would then argue either that this was some exception to the rule or that the ability to undergo martyrdom is perhaps not

a decisive criterion. In short, the convictions of the "Torah Only" school are articles of faith which are used to explain history rather than empirical principles learned from history. If my surmise is correct then the interpretation of history by people like Rabbi Weinberg must be approached with great caution.

Rabbi Weinberg's major point rests on the assumption that the cause of Spanish Jewry's choice of Marrano status rather than martyrdom was the weakness of their religious convictions which were nurtured by the assimilationist viewpoint. But do we know all of the elements operative at that time to enable us to isolate with any degree of assurance, assimilationism as the causal factor? Rambam had already ruled in his *Iggeres Hashmad*, that the Moslem persecution was different because it involved only a verbal affirmation and if one were to ask for guidance the answer would be "Utter the formula and live!" Perhaps Spanish Jewry's collective conditioning to the Marrano response