

II. ON APPLYING THE "D'VAR TORAH" CREATIVELY

At every Friday night service at Brandeis University, we hear a "d'var Torah." Rabbi Israel's account in the September issue of Clearing House comes closest to my concept of what a "d'var Torah" should encompass. "I speak," wrote Rabbi Israel, "I give lectures, which attempt to persuade towards various kinds of Jewish commitment or convey information about the tradition; I tell parables and stories; I read from traditional or contemporary devotional literature..." Believing as I do in creative services, I am convinced that a weekly repetition of identical prayers is not an adequate means for bringing students to a fuller understanding of Judaism.

I have found that students who are products of USY or NFTY will frequently shun Hillel services because they are afraid of finding the same pomposity and crassness of their home synagogues reproduced on a miniature scale in the Hillel Foundation. For this reason I believe there should be a fundamental difference between Hillel and a congregation with regard to the role of the sermon.

I favor a system in which the Hillel director speaks seldom from the pulpit -- perhaps no more than four or five times a year. I feel the Hillel director is most effective in study groups and private talks, that is, in contexts of the college campus and not those of the congregation. Hillel should be a place for experimentation. The director should not only invite qualified students to prepare a "d'var Torah," but also encourage university professors to participate. Last year, a philosophy professor at Brandeis presented his own quite controversial approach to religion and was answered in a subsequent "sermon" on the following Friday evening -- by an undergraduate. The advantage of having a professor speak on a religious topic or one related to Judaism is twofold: First, the students hear the professor in a Jewish context and realize that a synthesis between Western thought and Judaism is possible; and secondly, the professor is challenged to relate his particular discipline to a Jewish theme. Students should also be encouraged to speak, for unlike professors or rabbis, they do not have a ready audience for their ideas. Moreover, they are addressing their peers, and as such are concerned with the same problems as many members of their audience.

I agree with Rabbi Israel that the goal of a "d'var Torah" is "to establish the tone within which one hopes to accomplish one's work." At times, readings can be far more effective than speeches. The most memorable Hillel talks of my experience centered around parables and stories that were added to the service. At one service, our director read excerpts from the literature of the Holocaust on the eve of our annual Warsaw Ghetto anniversary program. On other occasions, students read Hasidic parables or an excerpt from Peretz's "Between Two Mountains," creating an exciting spiritual atmosphere unparalleled in the history of Brandeis. Finally, I recall Rabbi Israel's talk at a New England

Regional Institute which tied together a description of the atomic aftermath with the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah in the parashat hashavua.

The Hillel pulpit is not a place for the rabbi to express his stand on a particular political or intellectual controversy. Nor is it suited for sermons in the classical sense of the word. In fact, I doubt whether it is a desirable location for teaching Judaism -- the rabbi's study is far more suited for this purpose. In my opinion, the Hillel pulpit should be a place for Jewish students and faculty to

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