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## "Ghetto Judaism" Is "A Retreat From The World" Declares Rabbi Yoffie

While "American Jewry...has achieved unprecedented success in the 20th century," it is now faced "with a new challenge as we approach the millennium: the emergence of ghetto Judaism in American life," declares Rabbi Eric H. Yoffie, president of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations." *(Washington Jewish Week,* Aug. 27, 1998)

Rabbi Yoffie defines "ghetto Judaism" as "the belief that in order to maintain the pristine, unadulterated quality of Torah, Jews are obligated to avoid any but essential contact with the general society. It is the belief that our connection with the outside world should be a utilitarian one, limited to obtaining services and education needed to sustain our communal life. It is the belief that our responsibility to others does not extend beyond creating a Torah community."

Such "ghetto Judaism," Yoffie points out, exists in Israel, where it "has caused much grief," as well as in such enclaves as Williamsburg and Borough Park in New York. In the past, he notes, "it has always been a tiny and marginal phenomenon" but now "it is moving from the fringes of our world into the center."

Discussing the lawsuit against Yale University by four Orthodox students who have charged the university with religious discrimination for requiring all freshmen and sophomores to live in university dormitories, Yoffie states: "What is important here is not the details of a lawsuit, but the underlying attitude that the lawsuit reflects. I say this because of what the students themselves have said...They report that they do not choose their courses until they consult with their rabbis; that they remain silent in class rather than engage in discussion on topics such as abortion or evolution; that female students in music classes obtain female tutors so as not to violate religious law by singing for a man; and—specifics aside—that they fundamentally reject the culture of modernity which Yale represents, except to the extent that this culture advances their own specific interests."

While Jews in America "have the right to live circumscribed, isolated and inward looking lives," Yoffie declares, others must ask themselves whether, "now that ghetto Judaism is emerging into the public square, are we projecting an alternative view? Are we aggressively articulating our own very different vision of what Jewish tradition is all about?"

Speaking for liberal Judaism, Yoffie states that, "We refuse to live in an ivory tower precisely because that would limit the impact, the message and the grandeur of Torah. We believe in the significance of Torah in all times and in all areas of human endeavor, and we are confident that the general society will benefit from the Torah values we espouse...To look only within, to close ourselves off to the society around us and the needs of others, is nothing less than a betrayal of America."

Rabbi Yoffie defines his vision this way: "...champions of Torah and study and prayer, but champions, too, of a Judaism that engages the world; Jews who believe that self—centered religions wither, just like self—centered people; Jews who care for our own, but reject the me-first priorities of an exclusive Jewish agenda; Jews who believe, with a full heart, that we have something unique to contribute to the world in which we live." ●

## Israel's Use Of The Holocaust As A Political Weapon Is Called "A Desecration"

Young Israelis are sent to visit Nazi death camps in Europe and, argues Tom Segev, a columnist for the Israeli newspaper *Ha'aretz,* are taught a largely narrow and nationalistic lesson. He cites a booklet for teachers and guides written by Avraham Oded when he was the Ministry of Education's director of youth, which includes the following passage: "As we stand beside the death furnaces in the extermination camps our hearts fill with resentment and tears come to our eyes...We swear before our millions of murdered brothers, 'If I forget thee O Jerusalem, let my right hand lose its cunning.' And it is as if we hear the souls crying to us. 'In our deaths, we have commanded you to live. Preserve and defend the State of Israel as your most precious possession.''

In Segev's view, this exercise "exuded isolationism, to the point of xenophobia, rather than openness and love of humanity. The attempt...to include the Holocaust's universal lessons in the instruction had been almost completely abandoned."

Writing in *The Forward* (May 22, 1998), Alan Nadler, the former director of research at the YIVO Institute for Jewish research and an associate professor of Jewish studies at Drew University, described his own attendance at the "March of the Living" tour of Nazi death camps.

At a ceremony on the grounds of Auschwitz-Birkenau he heard Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu declare: "The Nazis failed...we won." Netanyahu then expounded on the "lessons" of Auschwitz to 7,000 participants.

Dr. Nadler laments that, "To my regret I was among them. For Mr. Netanyahu, as for many Israelis, the Holocaust is as uncomplicated as it is tragic. Its lessons are the lessons of Zionist historiography. If only the Jews had listened to the warning of the Zionist leaders and evacuated Europe for Eretz-Israel, Auschwitz would not have happened...Most important, the rise of the State of Israel is history's answer and consolation for the catastrophe that befell European Jewry."

The Netanyahu speech "offended me," states Nadler. "The Holocaust is rarely confronted in Israel on its own bleak, inconsolable terms. Even the country's official day of mourning for the Holocaust connects the tragedy with the glory of Jewish resistance and subsequent rebirth...The Jewish catastrophe is, in the Israeli national consciousness, deeply and inextricably linked with the subsequent rise of the Jewish state. The March of the Living is carefully orchestrated to inculcate its young participants with this perspective on the Holocaust...But the revival of the Jewish nation in its ancestral land...can never compensate for the loss of the largest, richest and most creative Jewish community in all of Jewish history."

Nadler argues that, "It is, of course, natural to search for meaning, comfort and redemption in the wake of such tragedy. To confront the Shoah on its own terms is difficult and painful. But to cast it in an ultimately positive light...to insist that at the end of the day, the tragedy has been corrected by the subsequent rise of Israel, is ultimately to distort the disconsolate dimension and incurable nature of what was visited upon our people in this century. Worse yet to use the Shoah as a political weapon as Mr. Netanyahu so clearly did that day at Auschwitz is to desecrate the memory of its victims."