

## Our Way<sup>1</sup>

Can one talk of a German Jewishness? In the sense that the Divine precepts of the Torah, as laid down in the Written and Oral Law, are equally binding for all parts of the Jewish people, the term “German Jewishness” is as unjustified and misleading as the expressions “Hungarian Jewishness,” “Polish Jewishness,” “Lithuanian Jewishness.” Wherever the Galus has dispersed the members of our people, they were united by the same ideals of sanctity to which they were to dedicate their lives.

Divine Judaism embraces all of life in all its manifestations, placing on it the stamp of the Divine Will. This Will obligates us to the most minute adherence to the lawful ordinances enacted by our spiritual leaders, which they formulated for the protection of the Divine Law and its realization in our lives. While Halacha and minhagim have caused differences in practices, which assumed significant proportions in various parts of the Jewish world, they have never in the least endangered the unity of our people that is derived from God's Torah. Still, temperament and taste, as far as admissible within the framework of Torah Law, have not been without influence on the way in which mitzvos are practiced, and have also shaped the character of the various Torah institutions. It is in this sense that we may perhaps speak of a “German Jewishness.”

Thinking of New York, which has become the melting pot of Jews from all parts of the world, it becomes quite evident that none of the various elements are willing to give up one iota of their characteristic Jewishness, be it Ashkenazic or Sephardic Jews, Lithuanian, Hungarian or Polish Jews — with or without the Chassidic stamp. Each of these groups have organized themselves for the purpose of fostering and perpetuating their characteristic type of Jewishness.

This holds true also for the Jews of Germany. This trend led to the creation of our Kehilla. Its by-laws, which are based on those of the Kehilla whose name it carries, bear testimony to its determination to maintain the sacred aspects of a true Kehilla, on new soil and under radically different circumstances, along the road charted by the great rabbinical leaders of Germany. This is its fundamental statute:

K'hal Adath Jeshurun has set itself the task to further the fundamentals of Judaism — Torah, Avodah, and Gemilus Chassodim — and to create for itself those institutions that are required for the realization of these precepts. The fundamental Law of this Kehilla is the Religious Law as handed down in Torah, Talmud and Shulchan Aruch. It is the highest authority for all decisions and measures by the Kehilla; they are valid only

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if they do not contradict any part of the Religious Law. The Divine Service of our Kehilla follows Minhag Ashkenaz.

While the by-laws of our Kehilla do not refer to its intent to maintain its German-Jewish character, this intention became evident at the very moment of its inception.

Physically, the Kehilla's German-Jewish character is immediately visible in the Synagogue. Extensive chapters in Shulchan Aruch stress the vital importance of cleanliness, order, and dignity in the Synagogue. Thus, these aspects in themselves have little to do with a specific "German Jewishness." The same holds true for our posture during the Tefillah. The Halacha is silent on the preference of a stationary versus a moving position in regard to the intensity of kavonoh during the Tefillah. The sainted Ari Hakodosh, and with him many of our Torah Greats, assumed stationary positions during the Tefillah — and they were certainly not German Jews.

The melodies of the Tefillah and the Niggunim of the Kerias Hatorah are warmly familiar to the members who originate from Germany and who would not wish to miss any part of their accustomed service. Whether this type of Divine Service pleases other circles is a matter of contention. The same holds true for other types of Divine services. This is a question of taste over which one cannot argue. One thing is certain: it has nothing whatever to do with Jewishness.

Our Synagogue possesses a choir, which, however, does not take any part in the actual Tefillah. The Torah-true Kehillos in Germany also had their choir, which finds its incomparable predecessor in the great choir of the Levites in the Bais Hamikdosh. When Rav Hirsch was once asked why he had a Synagogue choir, he replied gruffly: "Leave me in peace with your Meshorerim (men who used to accompany the Chazan in the Tefillah) whose religiosity is often quite doubtful. My choir consists of members and children of my Congregation; it is part and parcel of the Kehilla and its melodies enhance the dignity and sanctity of our Divine service." If we did not have our choir, we would sorely miss it.

It is a self-understood fact that our Synagogue was constructed and equipped in accordance with the rules of the Shulchan Aruch. The so-called Almemor rises in the midst of the Congregation. The separation of men and women is strictly carried out. In our Synagogue the lawful separation (Mechitza) is established by a high women's gallery that is topped by a tall trellis. These measures correspond with the requirements of the great rabbinical leaders of Germany. This required separation finds its halachic source in the arrangements that were made in the Bais Hamikdosh for the Simchas Bais Hasho'eiva (See *Middos* 2:5, *Sukka* 51b) when the men were placed downstairs while the women were placed on a gallery "to enable them to see from above" רמב"ם הלי בית (הבחירה, ch. 5). If Synagogues of certain countries featured the custom to use curtains for a women's gallery (instead of a trellis) it goes without saying that this custom must be continued in those of our local Synagogues that are also dedicated to the perpetuation of

other former customs. We may add that he who is not satisfied with the combination of gallery and trellis and rather prefers a thick curtain should also demand of his wife to cover her hair with a full cloth turban rather than with the customary “Sheitel.” For half-hearted measures are never in place. (As for covering of women's hair, we may also look towards our great rabbinical leaders of Germany. Our Kehilla has every reason to be proud of its women, whose overwhelming majority lives up to this law in the manner approved by our rabbinical leaders.)

This holds equally true of weddings in the Synagogue. In Hungary, weddings in the Synagogue represented a decided trend towards Reform, against which the local rabbinical authorities justly fought. This, however, was not the situation in Germany. Leading German Rabbis have performed weddings in the Synagogue. Thus, there is no reason for our Kehilla to refuse weddings in the Synagogue.

In reality, all the aforementioned aspects, which are chiefly evident in the Synagogue, still do not justify the term “German Jewishness.” We would prefer finding its justification in the ideological formulation of Torah im Derech Eretz. Our Kehilla strives ceaselessly to live up to this great precept in the life of its members and in the education of its youth. For Torah im Derech Eretz is the great heritage of the Kehilla's great rabbinical leaders in Germany.

At first glance, the program of Torah im Derech Eretz appears to be in complete contrast to the so-called “Chassidic Jewishness” — which has also lately become a catchword. However, this is true only when a distorted view is mistaken for the true picture of both aforementioned concepts of Jewish living, both designed to chart the course towards the fulfillment of God-willed tasks in our lives.

Generally, the superficial student deduces from the Torah im Derech Eretz precept, as expounded by the great rabbinical leaders in Germany, the necessity of acquiring secular knowledge, i.e., the training and proficiency in worldly cultures and professions. Actually, Torah im Derech Eretz implies infinitely more than a mere synthesis between Torah and secular knowledge. It views the Divine Torah as God's gift of mercy to His people, whose very existence is shaped and completely dominated by it. To be a Jew thus means to chart one's course of life in purity before God, i.e., to conceive of life as possible only under the rulership of the Divine Will, and to be ready at all times to subordinate family and social life to its purifying and sanctifying guidance. The Jewish man must submit all his thoughts and actions, all phenomena of life, all that serves to enrich his sphere of knowledge and perception before the tribunal of Torah, in order to accept from its hand that which may stand up before its truth and judgment.

Admittedly, Torah im Derech Eretz is also concerned with פרנסה and the preparation for it. Yet it is in this area of economic sustenance that God's Torah aims at the domination of the prevailing Derech Eretz in order to turn it into a קידוש השם. Consequently, in a broader sense, Derech Eretz embraces the “earth way” of the Yehudi,

who must seek self-perfection in all his actions and strivings under the rulership of the Will of God.

"On all your ways perceive Him" (*Mishlei* 3:6) — have Him before your eyes and analyze yourself whether you are able to stand up before Him. This great Jewish maxim of life mirrors most exactly the reflection of the Torah im Derech Eretz precept.

Is there a contradiction between genuine Chassidism and the Torah im Derech Eretz principle?

Let us be realistic: It is a fact that the rabbinical leaders in a number of countries refused to permit the study of secular knowledge. It is equally true that in this country even Chassidic circles recognized the necessity of a secular education and acted accordingly. Thinking of Eretz Yisrael, the Chassidic leadership there must also be aware of its responsibility in helping to provide trained teachers, physicians, lawyers, engineers and farmers for the Jewish land. If Torah authorities claim for themselves the leadership in Jewish life, they cannot possibly leave these vital professions to an element that refuses to conform to the Torah principles proclaimed by the Torah leaders. This being the case, what separates genuine Chassidic Jewishness from the genuine Torah im Derech Eretz Jewishness? Nothing at all.

One should not confuse Chassidus with the so-called Chassidic movement that began in Poland in the 18th century. The latter met the needs of the Jewish masses who lived in terrible misery, and thus spread rapidly. Tefillah was projected into the foreground, from which flowed strength and faith in God; dances and songs induced enthusiasm and joyfulness; the stress on human and humane qualities increased the self-respect of the impoverished. Thus, without a doubt, Chassidism saved these Jewish masses. However, the resulting frequent neglect of Torah study led to justified protest by Torah giants and caused a regrettable inner rift, which was subsequently healed when a great Chassidic leader returned the study of Torah to its rightful central position.

Genuine Chassidic Jewishness strives for Chassidus, which in itself is a lofty achievement on the ethical ladder which the Yehudi must attempt to climb. This is demonstrated for us by R. Pinchas ben Yair (*Avodah Zarah* 20b): Our highest duty is Torah and its study; this leads to carefulness which in turn leads to active striving; to guiltlessness; to purity; to holiness; to modesty; to the fear of sin; and, finally, to Chassidus. Accordingly, a Chassid is a Jew who gives himself in limitless love to the Divine Will and its realization, and to whom the welfare of his fellowmen constitutes the highest source of satisfaction (see *Chorev*, Ch. 14). Thus, in the Talmudic era, the title "Chassid" was a mark of highest distinction — and this is what it should be today.

The so-called Chassid who confines his Avodah to prayer does not deserve this title, as this "Avodah of the heart" does not call him to the Avodah of life where he must practice and apply the precepts of Chassidus.

He does not deserve this title if he is particular regarding the Kashrus of his food but fails to apply the precepts of conscientiousness and honesty to his business dealings.

He does not deserve this title if his social life is not permeated by love and deep interest in the welfare of his fellowmen; if he does not shun quarreling, envy or even abominable לשון הרע; if he does not earnestly strive to acquire those מדות for which Rav Hirsch (in his *Chorev*) calls so eloquently.

Certainly the mere exhibition of a certain type of clothing or the type of beard worn or even the adornment of long sideburns does not entitle the bearer to the title of honor — Chassid. These may be marks of distinction — but they must be earned to be deserved.

Even study of the Zohar does not necessarily signify the attainment of Chassidus. If this were so, only a few chosen ones would be eligible.

Yet the deep faith and trust in the Chassidic leadership is surely justified, for these Torah leaders personify in their very mode of life the precepts of Chassidus.

Doubtless, the so-called German Jewishness, with its Torah im Derech Eretz demand, can stand up proudly before genuine Chassidism; to live up to the Torah im Derech Eretz precept in its true meaning is to follow the path upon which Chassidus greets us as the crowning glory of life. Thus, Rav Hirsch, and with him the great Torah leaders in Germany, were exemplary Chassidim sent to us by Divine Providence.