

Chips From a Rabbinical Workshop

By RABBI DAVID ROSENBAUM, Austin, Texas

IV.

Chronic Complaints Against the Rabbi

Before constitutional government was established in Europe, and monarchs were invested with absolute power, the crowned heads labored under the conceit that they could do no wrong. And when matters of state did not go right, the members of the cabinet were usually blamed for the misdeeds of their sovereign, but the ruler himself—never; for, under the theory of the divine right of kings, "the king can do no wrong."

This old formula referring to the ruler, is apparently reversed nowadays when applied to the Jewish minister. It looks as though the rabbi can do no right. And here we leave out of consideration the so-called misfit rabbi who is in the ministry by the sufferance of the synagogue, or by a mistaken choice of profession. For, even the very capable rabbi is hard put to it. No matter how earnest and sincere he may be in his efforts, no matter how conscientious in the performance of his various duties, he is always the butt of criticism. Rarely will one find a congregation but where some dissatisfaction is shown with their minister. The fault finders are everywhere. Complaints are heard wherever we turn. The rabbi is not this, or he is not that. Even the successful minister labors under the same disadvantage. Obviously, the rabbi can do no right.

In analyzing this aspect of Jewish life, we must realize that we are dealing almost entirely with a modern phenomenon. Respect for authority and religion made for reverence in days gone by. The rabbi of old was, therefore, ordinarily honored as an ornament to the community. As the scholar who led a saintly life, he was removed from the petty trivialities of the day. The struggles, the strivings and the limitations of the age did not enter into his environment. Not that he held himself entirely aloof, but rather as one of and yet above his people, who by virtue of his position as the inspirer of lofty examples, as the exemplar of the life of unselfishness, he was ever regarded with esteem and respect, so that faultfinding could not be freely indulged in against him. Now that he is also the pastor, the social worker, and what not, in a word, acting the part of the general utility man of the congregation, he is almost wholly one of the people, and thus exposes himself to captious criticism and daily gossip. Moreover, formerly he was maintained out of the revenue of the community, and not by membership dues, thus barring the querulous from the claim that they are the ones who "pay the piper." And as a matter of fact, he "piped" on very rare occasions. Now, however, he is directly or indirectly the beneficiary of the individual members of the congregation who claim they have a right to voice their opinion. Moreover, we live in a democratic age, with more emphasis on rights than on duties. And our environment of freedom undermines respect and authority. We consider ourselves at liberty to challenge anything and anybody. Therefore, the prevailing phenomenon of chronic complaints against the rabbi.

We may dismiss with a moment's

notice those captious critics whose whimsicalities make them dissatisfied with whatever condition may confront them. Apparently, they must vent their spleen at the rabbi. We have in every community such constitutional "kickers" who are censorious under all circumstances. Thus, when the rabbi is single, they prefer a married man; and if he be married, they desire a single man. If he is the pastor and makes periodic visits on his congregants they express their preference for the student and scholarly rabbi; and if he is studiously inclined, they argue in favor of the pastor. If he speaks straight from the heart and delivers plain sermons and addresses, he is blamed with considering his congregation as ignorant. And if his addresses are couched in scholarly terms he is accused of instructing the congregation as if they were his school children. In a word, they are hypercritical, and at no time pleased. Whatever the rabbi is, he is wrong. Fortunately, there are not very many of this type in a congregation.

More of the criticisms, however, probably spring from temperamental differences. Psychologists tell us that we are all atypical. No two or us are exactly alike. We vary in dispositions, tastes, likes and dislikes, because we are each the product of peculiar factors entering into our being. The many subtle forces making up our lives are not identical in the case of two persons. We are each the result of a different heredity, and of an environment and education which hardly two experience alike. And the outcome is that we are strikingly dissimilar in our natures. The stimuli responding in the one, may be absent in the other. Two people frequently see the same thing in a different light. In a word, we are singularly unlike in our outlooks, in our methods, and manner of behavior.

And the rabbi is dealing entirely with the human element. He works with and labors for his congregants. He ministers directly to men and women; he speaks and appeals to his fellow-men. Whatever he says is subject to scrutiny, whatever he does must pass the discerning eye. The policies he pursues are therefore approved by some, but not necessarily by others, because all are not constituted alike to feel and see the same.

The trouble then issues from the fact that we are lacking in broadmindedness to realize that there is more than one royal road. There may be more than one way of doing a given thing. And because a certain method appeals to us, does by no means imply it is the only way, or even the best way. But we at once become captious in our comments and cavil at everything. Our criticism then leads to mere faultfinding. It is no more just criticism than gossip is discussion. From such circumstances arise many of the judgments and opinions we form of the actions of the man in public life. They are largely subjective—the reflection of our peculiar tastes. We are impatient with the methods of others, when in reality they may just as good as, if not better than, our own.

Therefore, the chronic complaints against the minister due to temperamental differences need not discourage us. The fair-minded man or woman will readily perceive that the public

official serves many men with as many different minds. Each one feels his own way about the rabbi's doings. Each one would like to see the minister follow a certain peculiar method. And as the rabbi can only be honest with himself and do as his conscience and reason dictate, it is inevitable that he will antagonize many in the congregation and arouse criticism.

Furthermore, in no other profession does the laity consider itself so competent to judge as in the case of the ministry. The rabbi's efforts are more open to public scrutiny than that of any other professional man. The lawyer, for instance, can easily fool and bamboozle his clients, who know nothing of the law, and willingly listen to his counsel. Similarly, the physician can tell his patients almost anything about his treatment of their cases, who will eagerly carry out instructions. The technical knowledge of the lawyer or the doctor being foreign to the outsider, no one of the profession will dare question the way they go about their work. But it is far different with the rabbi. The hard prerequisites for the ministry, the serious and arduous studies the Jewish minister must pursue in preparation for his calling, are not even vaguely surmised by the laity. They are utterly ignorant of the vast literature and the checkered career of the Jewish people which the rabbi must be familiar with, at least in a measure, not to mention his secular studies. Nor do they realize the multiplicity of duties he performs. Each one is usually egotistic enough to imagine that the rabbi must minister to him alone, forgetting that there are other egoists in the congregation. And yet, the fact remains that we judge the rabbi mainly by the manner of his address, and secondarily by his general personality, leaving out of consideration almost entirely his long professional preparation and the variety of duties he performs in the community in one form or another. Accordingly, each one feels justified in giving an opinion and estimate of the rabbi's worth; each one assumes the role of self-appointed critic; with the result that wherever we turn he is being judged, criticised and underrated.

The real source of the trouble, however, lies in the circumstance that conditions are radically wrong with present day methods of religious ministration. The difficulty lies in the fact that the rabbi is obliged to act the part of factotum of the congregation. He must be all things in one. He ministers as preacher, teacher, pastor, social worker, scholar, spokesman, and what not, to the community. Each one phase of his various duties requires special excellence and experience. Specialization by means of division of labor which we have gradually learned to appreciate, as for instance, in the case of the sciences, and in the medical and legal professions, we do not as yet begin to realize the need of in the ministration of religion.

The rabbi expected to be all things to all men, must, in the nature of the case, fall short in one set of duties or another, unless he possesses extraordinary power and by far more than average ability. If he stresses the pulpit work and emphasizes his position as representative of his people, he is bound to curtail his pastoral duties and weaken his hold on the philanthropic agencies in the community. And if he makes periodic calls and is in close touch with his congregants, his interest in pulpit work and in Sunday school is certain to suffer. The rabbi's work is simply too many-sided. And yet, we expect him to look

after all the activities of the congregation.

Could the lawyer give satisfactory counsel on all ports of law? Certainly not. We are sensible enough to expect him to render service only in that restricted branch of the law in which he practices. Similarly we do not ask of the physician to master the entire field of medicine and treat all possible physical ailments. We go to the specialist in case of serious illness. Why, then, should we expect of the rabbi to be the effective preacher in the pulpit; the experienced pedagog in the religious school; the ever-ready pastor in the congregation; the ubiquitous social worker in the community; the versatile student in Jewish and secular learning; the respected spokesman on every occasion; and a variety of other things, all in one? We are simply asking the impossible.

Until we learn the need of departmentalizing the rabbinical profession, and engage the services of several specialist rabbis, as we have seen in our former essay, we shall continue to hear all sorts of complaints against the rabbi. It is beyond the power of one man in the larger congregations to do all that is expected of the Jewish minister. And even if he could, by superhuman efforts, find the needed time and strength (which is barely possible) to cover the round of duties involved in his profession, he could not do all of them successfully, because each phase of his activity requires special aptitude and talent. One could only do one thing with expertness. And even in the case of the smaller congregation, where one rabbi could cover the ground, he is handicapped by the diversity of excellence called for the variety of duties imposed upon him. After all, one cannot do different things with equal celerity and satisfaction.

Perhaps the layman who, because he does not understand the prerequisites of the rabbinical profession, thinks he realizes what the rabbi could do, would make a success of the Jewish ministry, and perform all the rabbinical duties expected of the rabbi of today. But the poor rabbi who is only human must fall short in the estimation of his congregants, so long as present day conditions continue to prevail. Only a layman could find the time and possess the gift for all sorts of duties, and do them well; but the rabbi—never.

Justifiable, sane criticism, it seems, would be ever welcomed by the rabbi, who is ordinarily a gentleman, aware of human limitations and imperfections. But if the truth were told, how many are sympathetic enough to state their criticism in a constructive manner? How many of the querulous are intelligent enough to offer helpful suggestions? And how many have the courage of their conviction to speak out openly above board? In the analysis, their grumblings are but mealy mouthings and frothy words.

At any rate, whether the faultfindings be due to "constitutional" failings, to temperamental differences or to the character of the rabbi's work exposing it to the public gaze; or, again, whether it be due to the faulty undepartmentalized nature of religious ministration of today, the outstanding seamy side of the profession is the everlasting carping criticism, the chronic complaints, which to the sensitive nature of the minister is galling beyond measure, and at times becomes so unbearable as to reach the limit of human endurance. Is it not strange that the rabbi, of all mortals, can do no right?