

Jewish Frontier
July, 1950

Correspondence

TO THE EDITOR:

Mr. Lewisohn's article in the May issue of the *Jewish Frontier* contains, in my opinion, some glaring errors of commission and omission.

He reads into the "Program for Jewish Life Today," published in the *Reconstructionist* (Vol. 16, No. 1) a conception of adjustment to "modernity" and "modern conditions" which not only is not there but is definitely deprecated in that document. Mr. Lewisohn confines himself to his own arbitrary interpretation of modern life. He assumes that modernism is synonymous with the barbaric and catastrophic totalitarianisms of our day. We are amazed that Mr. Lewisohn should have imputed to Reconstructionists a yielding to the forces that make for totalitarianism. The "Program for Jewish Life Today" states "Judaism demands resistance to any totalitarianism because it necessarily deprives the individual of his freedom to make the most of his own life." Reconstructionists have consistently championed democracy against every authoritarian encroachment on freedom of conscience and human rights. Adjustment to modern life cannot mean indiscriminate acceptance of all its mutually contradictory elements. It must mean taking cognizance of both the good and the evil in the world today and neither rejecting any good that is not traditional nor condoning any evil that is rooted in tradition.

Even more amazing to me than this misrepresentation of the Reconstructionist attitude to modern life is Mr. Lewisohn's own failure to recognize the very existence of problems that constitute the crucial issues affecting Jewish life today. Without entering into any lengthy discussion of these issues, let me list just a few of them:

1. How shall Judaism reckon with the necessary conditions resulting from the mechanization of our economic processes
2. Has Judaism anything to learn from science and the scientific method that can make for the spiritual enrichment of Jewish life? Ought not Jewish religion reckon with the experimental method, with the authority of verifiable facts as opposed to that of dogma or tradition and with the willingness, characteristic of science, to reexamine traditional beliefs and theories, when these are challenged by new experience?
3. The struggle of democracy against totalitarian tendencies has heightened our awareness of the need for safeguarding the right to be different. How shall this awareness affect the inner life of the Jewish community, which in the past, insisted on universal conformity with authoritarian codes regulating all the minutiae of human conduct?

These are only a few of the issues of modern life with which any program for Jewish living must reckon. A romantic glorification of the past will not avail. Only by applying human intelligence to the reconstruction of Jewish life can we save Judaism from those dangers that beset it in the modern world.

JACK J. COHEN
Director of the Jewish Reconstructionist Foundation

TO THE EDITOR:

I AM SORRY THAT Rabbi Cohen has the impression that I ever dreamed of accusing the Reconstructionist which, with reasonable reservations, I respect and admire, of totalitarian sympathies. The three phrases I quoted from the Reconstructionist program re-iterate the well-known position of the movement that Judaism should be governed by the winds of doctrine of a particular age and make them its criterion. To deny this is not as monstrous as it seems to Rabbi Cohen. It grieves me to see Jews lag behind in better things. In my own

humble way I seem to myself to be within Jewry a representative of that powerful current in that Christian world which is connected with the name of the late Nicholas Berdyaev and with the names of Karl Barth and Reinhold Niebhr. If Rabbi Cohen will do me the honor of reading my argument to the end he will see, in the light of this statement, just where I stand.

The three questions he asks show that he has no inkling of my position whatever he may think of it.

1. Of course, the truths of any religion have precisely nothing to do with such things as the “mechanization of economic power” except, perhaps, to sit in judgement on its moral results.

2. No, Judaism has nothing to learn from science. Except in the realm of physics the experimental method has produced nothing but fallacies and chaos. So soon as it touches the phenomena of life, man, history, it has proved itself confusing unveracious and wholly evil in its inferences.

3. Correct. The right to be different is the most precious of democratic rights. Who has deprecated the *asher bacharbanu mi-kol ha amin?* Who? The Reconstructionists or I who humbly and fervently believe it and who believe that all history, from Sinai to Warsaw and the Medinath Yisrael, has confirmed it irrefutably?

LUDWIG LEWISOHN
Brandeis University
Waltham, Mass.