

# LIBERTY

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## It's fun to be a Jew

*We don't wear beards.*

*We aren't drunks.*

*We have rich Yiddish wit.*

by

RABBI ABRAHAM L. FEINBERG



**RITUAL** of Canada's 230,000 Jews is colorful. In prayer shawl: Rabbi Feinberg at Toronto's Holy Blossom Temple.

**SOME PEOPLE**, even in 1957, still respond to the word, "Jew", as though it described a mysterious, different species. Mark Twain once remarked, "Jews are human — only more so." To his cynical eye, that was *not* a compliment. To me, however, it begins to sum up the most important thing about us.

I have always opposed the *Merchant of Venice* as required reading in public schools. When Shakespeare offers us so many, and greater, plays, why select one that caricatures an entire people and may poison young minds? After a *Fighting Words* TV panel, on which I voiced that opinion, a dozen Gentiles phoned me to apologize for their stubborn Jew-hatred.

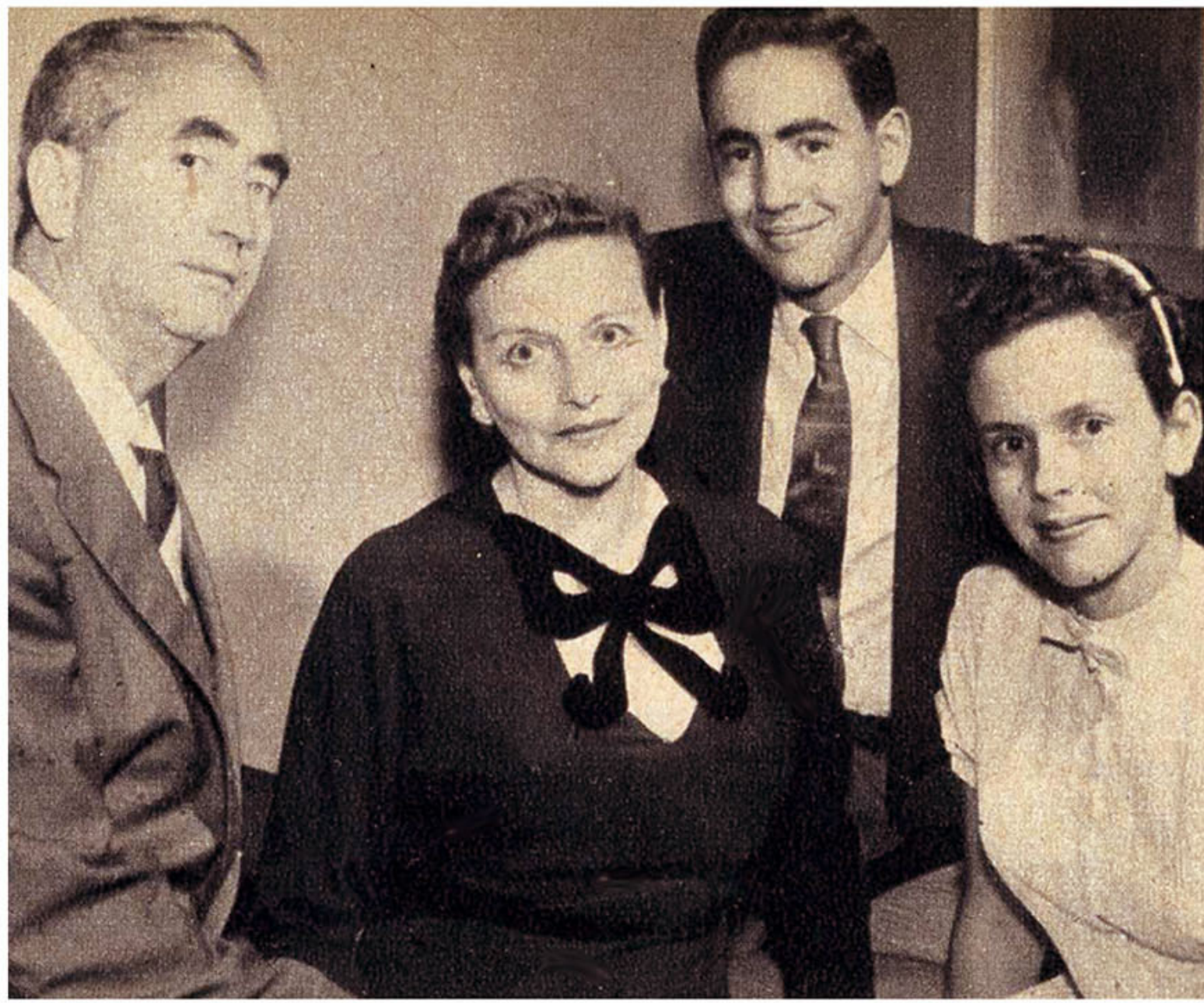
"Now we realize where it came from—the *Merchant of Venice* in high-school!" was their common confession. Yet the one, famous "Doth not a Jew . . ." speech by Shylock almost redeems the entire balance.

The Bard of Avon had perhaps never seen a Jew. But he *did* know the simple truth that we are subject to the same ills, misfortunes and faults that plague everyone.

**Gentile: 'Do Jews ever get cancer?'**

**AT** A BULL-SESSION with a circle of Gentile youngsters, at a junior college, one of them asked me, in all earnestness, "Do Jews ever get cancer?" He had heard we were immune. That very moment, my youngest sister lay dying of the dread disease. So his question was not only fantastic, but ironic.

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**JEWISH CHILDREN jive, use slang, look like neighbors. Rabbi with wife; daughter, Sarah, 18; son, Jonathon, 22.**

In former years, before TV appearances familiarized smaller Canadian towns with the fact that rabbis and beards are not synonyms, I often shocked Rotary, Kiwanis and church audiences.

"We didn't recognize you when you got off the train," they told me. "You have no beard!"

I can't hold them to account. Conventional pictures of the "Jewish type" have always provided him with a beard, to represent a patriarch.

Actually, beards among Jews are confined to the vanishing Old World immigrants, for whom they remain a sign of special piety. (Although, in healthy skeptical vein, an old Yiddish adage has it that "a Jew without a beard is better than a beard without a Jew.")

Since more than half of Canadian Jewry is now native-born, such hirsute decoration can be observed in far greater proportion among CBC playwrights, self-conscious Canadian bohemians, and élite military regiments. Young orthodox rabbis — in technical obedience to the Biblical interdiction of razors for the ultra-pious, and in social obeisance to the Western cult of the clean shave — now use a depilatory powder.

**We play golf, cards with intensity.**

**I**N THE HEBREW language (ancient tongue of the Bible, now the official Israeli language), there is a verb form called *pi'el*. It intensifies the normal meaning of a verb. We Jews might be called the *pi'el* type of personality. On the defensive, in a hostile environment, we have had to sharpen the only weapons permitted to us: intensity, alertness, swift-thinking. We even play golf and gin-rummy with more fervor. If, as I believe, happiness is at bottom a heightened awareness of life—a warm, alert spirit, as though every pore were open — how can a Jew's life be drab?

Of course, the secret of Jewish psychology is our status as a minority. In Canada, there are only 230,000 of us.

Yet, what attention we receive! Sometimes, I wish we were less sure to be noticed. Turn the microscope away.

There is a be-whiskered story about a zoology professor, who asked his class, of many foreigners, to write papers on the elephant. A German student wrote on, "An Introduction to the Bibliography for a Definitive Study of the Elephant"; a French student on, "The Love Life of the Elephant"; an English student, "Elephant Hunting"; an American, "Breeding Bigger

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and Better Elephants". But the Jewish student chose as his subject: "The Elephant and the Jewish Problem".

**We savor two cultures; enjoy both.**

**A**S HISTORY'S helpless, hapless, always dramatized and "different", No. 1 minority, we Jews should be "down" on life — sour, dour, embittered. In fact, I often repeat a Yiddish exclamation: *Es is schwer zu sein a Yid* (it is hard to be a Jew!) But, in more rational and normal moods, I — and the Jewish folk — disagree completely with that cry. It's fun to be a Jew!

Sometimes, I ask myself: "How would I like having been born into a Gentile household?" My query always concludes with the same result: "Yes, being a Gentile would be easier, practically advantageous, more serene. But it would lack the color and zest I have experienced as a Jew."

Not being a Jew would mean living with greater "peace of mind", in a world where I was like the majority. But, being a Jew in vigorous, democratic Canada, means I can inhabit *two* cultural worlds, enrich my life with what is best in Canada, and what is best in Judaism.

In Bellaire, Ohio, a little mining-town on the Ohio River where I was born and raised, part of me had a childhood mildly reminiscent of *Huckleberry Finn* days: rowing a hand-made john-boat (flat at both ends); poling a raft out into waves churned up by stern-wheeler steam boats; hopping freight-trains; sliding down the muddy "crick" banks into the old sycamore swimming hole; picking paw-paws and wild blackberries; hooking catfish with a stick and string (though we could not bring them home, because they are not *kosher* — permitted by orthodox dietary laws).

But those days were clouded by brawny brutes, who called me a "Christ-killer". They doused me under the school-fountain, and rubbed my face in the snow, to scare me away from a Gentile competitor's newspaper stand.

And every night, silently in bed, along with other prayers for a pair of skates, a bicycle, and the well-being of my parents, I beseeched God for the return of the Jewish homeless to Palestine (though I didn't learn of an organized Zionist movement until many years later).

When Christian hymns were sung in school, I fixed my mind on Jewish imagery, and even tried to substitute other words, under my breath. I loved the music, but was determined to keep my soul intact.

The "two worlds" were here in spiritual conflict — but they both enriched my life.

**M**Y FATHER was a learned scholar, not a businessman. Whenever I hear that "Jews have all the money", I think of him and countless others who devoted their lives to study of the *Torah* (Holy Teaching). I worked at every store and factory in town — and even on a steel-mill laboring-gang. But the dream of a rabbinical education, which spurred me, came from forebears, who declared that "the study of *Torah* is equal to all other virtues".

Three U.S. universities — Cincinnati, Chicago and Columbia — together with the Hebrew Union College, have contributed substance to my mind. My wife graduated from Smith College in Northampton, Mass. Our daughter, Sarah Jane,

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18, entered that school last September. Jonathan, our son, 22, is a medical student at the University of Toronto, which conferred on me the high honor of a Doctor of Laws degree last May. We are all moulded, therefore, by the cultural currents of this late hour — offspring of the 20th century.

But another, much earlier, place schooled my spirit. That place is called by a Hebrew name: *heder* (Hebrew school, pronounced with a thick “h”, meaning literally “room”). I went there, from 4 p.m. to 6 p.m., five days a week, in the rear of the *shule* (synagogue).

While my Gentile friends went swimming after school, or played football, I was mercilessly drilled in Hebrew by a *melamed* (teacher). His coat-tails flapped and waggled, and he revenged himself on his destiny by pulling our ears.

There, in the dingy *heder*, I decided to be a rabbi, and build a bridge between Grinkishok, the tiny Lithuanian village of my parents, and America, my native land.

**I**N CANADA, the wedding of two worlds has new labels, but the same chemistry. Instead of baseball (I know rabbis who could compete on *The \$64,000 Question* in its lore), my wife, children and I tingle to a good hockey match (most exacting test of skill and endurance in the sport realm, except, perhaps, a swim across Lake Ontario). Yet I rejoice that my son also plays more cerebral and traditionally “Jewish” games, like chess and bridge.

This past summer, I was thrilled by Stratford’s production of *Hamlet*. But *The Dybbuk*, a powerful drama of religious folk-superstition in the hunger-driven Jewish settlements of Eastern Europe, is no less a catharsis for my spirit.

Who can touch the nerve of gaiety like Orillia, Ont.’s Stephen Leacock? But a reader of Yiddish will compare no humorist anywhere to Sholom Aleichem (a Yiddish writer who immortalized comic-tragic Old World Jewry).

The tongue that Shakespeare spoke is the vessel of my thinking. Am I the poorer for being able to drink from Hebrew and Yiddish, fountain-heads of my fathers’ wisdom? Should we not be delighted to admit into our common talk such international, colorful Jewish words as *schlemihl*, *schlimazel* and *nudnik*?

I enjoy the gustatory pleasure of Quebec pea-soup, Ontario cheeses, Winnipeg gold-eye. But to Jewish family gatherings something is added. Our housewives probably did not invent *gefillte fish*; many so-called Jewish dishes were *borrowed* — discovered by a keen smell and taste, throughout the wanderings of my people. The dietary laws, observed by orthodox Judaism, limited the cook’s ingredients, and challenged her art. The resultant skill, responding to handicap, has made the Jewish table a delight (and often a digestive hazard).

During the last war, I served as civilian chaplain in a ski-troop training camp high in the Rocky Mountains, near Denver. For combat-exercise, recruits were issued “K-rations” — a tin of expertly-chosen, vitamin-rich, foods, concentrated to give maximum vitality on a gruelling mountain march. My people has endured numerous gruelling marches during its epic journey. Their K-rations included the following: *kishke* (entrails stuffed with a paste of flour, chicken-grease and fried chitlings); *kugel* (pudding, usually of raisin-sweetened noodles); *Kashe* (fried barley); *kreplach* (three-cornered meat-dump-

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lings in chicken-soup); *knishes* (chicken-liver patty).

**WITH A WRY TWIST** and a shrug of resignation, we Jews laugh at ourselves. As the Yiddish folk-word reminds us: "Jews *must* joke about themselves. Nu, should we then weep?"

How could we have survived without the release, the liberating gift of laughter? That safety-valve is not needed to preserve our morale in the free air of Canada — but it's fun.

Jewish wit even "took it out" on the rabbi, whose leadership was sacrosanct in the community. Witness that famous yarn about the rabbinical applicant for an important pulpit. An obliging friend gave him a fulsome recommendation:

"He can be compared to Moses, to Shakespeare, and to Demosthenes."

After a year, the Congregation was sadly disillusioned, and the President despatched a complaint to the rabbi's sponsor. "How could you describe him in such flattering terms?"

The reply came at once:

"Who has deceived you? He *is* like Moses, who knew no English; he *is* like Shakespeare, who knew no Hebrew; he *is* like Demosthenes, who spoke with pebbles in his mouth! *Mazel tov!*" (Hebrew: "good luck!")

**WE JEWS** have always regarded knowledge as a path to the godly life. Our social aristocracy arose on scholarship, not material wealth. The spindly-legged rabbinical aspirant, who searched for God's truth in the Holy Law, barely sustained his body on a crust of bread in the *Yeshiva* (college); but every door and heart were open to him. Even today, this prestige of intellect ranks the "professions" over "business" in the Jew's choice of a career for his children.

We have been trained to inquire. As the old story relates, a Gentile once prodded his Jewish friend: "Why do you people always answer a question with a question?" And the answer came swift; there was just time enough for a hunched shoulder: "And why not?"

From time immemorial, Jews have climbed the clean, rarefied height of books, ideas, reason. It was their escape from poverty and pain. Among the youngsters in Holy Blossom Religious School, I detect lingering, sturdy signs of that old quest for truth.

**MAYBE THE ONE** phrase to cover the Jewish approach is: "*love of life*". We believe in human happiness on *this* earth. We embrace life.

Of course, Judaism declares, with profound unreserved faith, that the spirit of man is immortal. The most beautiful and moving prayer in the synagogue, Gentile visitors always tell me, is the Memorial for the dead, *Kaddish* — "sanctification". It looks into the emptiness of the grave, and irradiates it with trust in God and His gift of eternal life.

But we Jews have not drawn a map of the next world, and we don't dwell there *now*. Whatever happens there will be in keeping with God's love. In the meantime, life is *here*; the Creator has bestowed it upon us for our enjoyment. As Voltaire is reputed to have whispered on his death-bed to a priest: "One world at a time!"

High-walled monasteries, hair-shirts, Prohibition, cheerless Sabbaths, and the Puritan who smells Satan in the simplest joy — all are foreign to Judaism. I have been told that Connecticut had a law against kissing one's wife on Sunday. In

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contrast, Jewish sages hallowed marital love as a symbol of the love of God — especially on the Sabbath, which marks the fulfilment of His creation.

**W**HY IS THE alcoholism and drunkenness rate low among Jews? Among other causes, of one I am sure: We don't tell our children it is a crime against God ever to drink, and we don't *act* that way. A Jew was never too destitute for a bottle of sacramental wine in his cupboard; if necessary, the communal charity organization saw to it. With that wine, he could assert his equal dignity and worth with the richest man in town, by performing the ritual of sanctifying his home on Sabbath Eve and festivals (*Kiddush* — a solemn ceremony on practically all religious occasions). Wine "gladdens the heart of man".

Not that we condoned *over*-drinking. My father would have recoiled in horror at the very thought of being intoxicated. His contempt — and pity — for the town drunk was boundless. But he smacked his lips over a thimbleful of *schnapps* from a little decanter on the mantle-piece; he thus deflated what might have been a glamorous sin into a kitchen routine.

In general, our love of life breeds a gentle attitude toward the sinner, whom, presumably, the love of life has turned astray. The genuinely pious Jew says, "Let God judge him." Even after exploding into anger, he adds: "May God not punish me for these harsh words." We admire sinners not at all; but they need a boost more than the over-pious saints, who have no doubt about their standing.

Many Jewish boys (and girls) seem to plan careers as physicians. Our best brains went to the research laboratory — whenever the world opened its doors to them.

Millions owe their survival or health to Jews like Haffkine, who discovered the cholera serum; Ehrlich, creator of salvarsan; Wasserman and his test for syphilis; Schick, inventor of the diphtheria test; Goldberger, who conquered pellagra; Waksman's streptomycin; and Salk's polio vaccine. In my opinion, the ages-old contribution of the Jewish mind to medicine goes back to our basic love of life, and the will to preserve it.

**A**ND SO WITH our concept of marriage — this, too, is a product of a frank, natural acceptance of the life-instinct. Judaism regards marriage, not as an absolute, unbreakable sacrament; but as a covenant.

When a union no longer brings holy and mutual happiness, it were better dissolved. Because marriage was made for human beings — their *self*-fulfilment, as well as their fulfilment of the very first Biblical law: "Be fruitful and multiply". The marital relationship is sacred and inviolable, while it exists. But when it ceases in spirit, it should end in law.

This frank refusal to accept marriage as a permanent, indissoluble yoke, not only follows Hebrew Scripture, but the elementary Jewish tenet that God wants us to be *happy*.

Teen-age marriage, with parental subsidy, now the vogue, is undeniably patterned after "an old Jewish custom". In Europe, a son-in-law, especially if he were a scholar, received free board and lodging in the bride's house — both as a prospect and as a groom.

There was a difference then, however. A couple was brought together, not by moonlit "love at first sight"; but by arrangement between the families. The prac-

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tical wisdom of elders, instead of an instant chemical reaction — and, as intermediary, the *shadchen* (marriage broker).

The *shadchen* is the classic butt of Jewish folklore. One moderate sample:

“You faker, you swindler!” hissed the prospective bridegroom, taking the *shadchen* aside at the engagement party. “Why did you ever get me into this? The girl’s old, she’s homely, she lisps, she squints —”

“You don’t have to whisper,” interrupted the *shadchen*. “She’s deaf, too!”

Should the *shadchen* be revived? I would not dare to hint that a youth, writhing in the trammels of love, may be less than qualified to assess the ingredients of fruitful matrimony—though I harbor earnest doubts. But, if not a marriage-broker, at least a marriage-counsellor; pre-marital advice to prevent post-marital divorce.

**JEWISH TEEN-AGERS** today dress, giggle, talk back, and jive, like their Gentile neighbors. And the so-called “Jewish” facial appearance (if it ever existed), has vanished, as casual observation of any Holy Blossom Confirmation Class will prove. Our kids take first-class citizenship for granted. To Jewish youth in Canadian suburbia, Dachau and Buchenwald are only nasty words.

Furthermore, they have been conditioned by circumstances completely severed from the Old World. Most are second-generation Canadians. Except an occasional expletive, they don’t speak Yiddish — the tongue of the Jewish masses, based on 13th-century old German, with a percentage of Hebrew and a heavy sprinkling from the local scene.

I imbibed the Yiddish folk-speech, and its “other world”, with my mother’s love. Will the new generation have the “fun” of two worlds? The answer, to some extent, is being written by Holy Blossom Temple.

Of course, the Temple does not even attempt to teach Yiddish. Hebrew, the “sacred tongue” of religion, is being studied by pupils who desire it. The spirit of the Jew must be clothed in modern garb; we are liberal, progressive, thoroughly Canadian. Yet, I pray that the reverence for life and intellect, of brotherhood and justice — which are the essence of the *Torah*-teaching — will become the cherished heritage of our kids, through the Temple, whose pulpit I have been proud to occupy these 14 years.

“Holy Blossom!” I am often asked its origin; no other synagogue on earth bears such a name. (An editorial in a church journal once designated it as “Holy Rosary”. Since the editor was reproving me for a statement on the crucifixion, the error may have emanated from his subconscious.) Actually, the name is an English translation of the Hebrew words “*Pirchay Kodesh*”, which are engraved on a *Torah* ornament donated to the congregation in 1857, only a few months after it was founded. *Pirchay Kodesh* may refer to the young apprentice priests in the temple on Mt. Zion 20 centuries ago, “holy blossoms” of sacred service to God.

This infant house of Jewish worship, second oldest in Canada, began in Toronto with seven families as an orthodox congregation. Reform or liberal Judaism was unknown then in Canada. The minutes of its meetings reveal many proceedings that now seem antiquated and amusing. A member was expelled in 1860 for “disgraceful conduct”; in addition, the *shochet* (*kosher* butcher) on official orders, charged him one penny per pound extra.

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One *shochet* had to take an oath, before the Scroll of the Law, that he would stop drinking spiritous or fermented liquors, except "when prescribed by a physician".

These were only the minor difficulties which confronted a tiny congregation of pioneers in the new world. Today, it cares for the spiritual needs of 5,000 persons, and is the spokesman of dynamic, social-minded Canadian Reform Judaism.

From the start, Holy Blossom has adapted ancient ritual to the needs of today. *Toronto* is our home. We clasp the hand of the living future—not the hand of a dead past. Our lode-star is love of life — which has guided the Jewish people throughout its pilgrimage.

And so we shall continue: a bastion of liberal thought, a bridge between the old and the new, so that our children may walk into tomorrow with "two worlds" in their hearts. I have found that "fun" on the highest level; so will *they*. ♦ ♦

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