

Farewell from a 'non-Kahanist'

Yoram Hazony

In the spring of 1984, on a night when most of the university's undergraduates were out drinking and dancing at the annual "P-Party," Rabbi Kahane came to speak at Princeton.

Two hundred and fifty students, mostly non-observant Jews, gave up the free beer to go hear what the infamous fanatic, condemned by the Hillel but brought to campus by the debate team, had to say for himself. It was a speech many of us never forgot.

"When your parents can't give you a single reason not to marry a wonderful girl you're in love with, that's because she isn't Jewish, that's just racism," he told us.

"When you have a bar mitzva where you don't understand a word you read, and the rabbi and the congregation think its okay because it's a chance to spend \$10,000 on shrimp and salmon mousse, that's just idiocy," he told us.

"When millions of Jews sit in America so they can make money, and take part in Israel's fight to survive by turning on the TV and maybe writing a check for a few bucks, that's just cowardice," he told us.

And he told us something else. He told us that we were ignorant about Judaism, that we knew more about Christianity and Marxism than we knew about being Jews. When one of the students began fumbling for examples to show that Jewish law was oppressive and outdated, Kahane paused to stare down at him from the podium, disgust and pity washing across his face.

"What do you know?" he said slowly. "What do you know? I'm an Orthodox rabbi. I studied for years

and years and years. You don't know a thing about what Judaism is. Why don't you go learn something, so you don't have to be an ignorant in front of all these people?"

We were mesmerized. Most of my friends, who had never had a conversation with an observant Jew, were astounded that an Orthodox rabbi could be an intelligent person, that he could actually defend his views against a crowd of Princeton students, when we had all thought that Judaism had to be something primitive and foolish. We listened in astonishment, and finally in shame.

We never adopted his political views. But Kahane was the only Jewish leader who seemed to understand how much we wanted a good reason to stay Jewish

when we began to realize that he was right. We did know nothing.

MEIR KAHANE spent 20 years touring American college campuses with his message: learn about Judaism, move to Israel, stand up and fight for what you believe in.

In my years as a student, never once did I hear this message come out of the mouth of another speaker. Not from the campus rabbi, who feared that speaking out would make students feel uneasy. Not from the Jewish Agency emissary, who thought that if we had "any questions" we would come to him. Not from visiting Israeli politicians, who usually gave neither aliya nor Judaism even an honorable mention. Rabbi Kahane was the only Jewish leader who ever cared enough about our lives to actually come around and tell us what he thought we could do. He was the only one who seemed to understand how

much we wanted a good reason to stay Jewish - though all we got was fateful study breaks at the Hillel.

And his message worked. At least five students who were in the hall that night gradually became observant. Today they live in Israel, and there are others on the way. One, who took up Rabbi Kahane's challenge to spend years studying in yeshiva, credits Kahane's talk with having been the single event that goaded him onto the road that eventually brought him, his wife and son to make aliya. And many others were certainly affected in less dra-

nothing more than a hoax, a pact among sentimentalists to pretend that the local rabbi was wise, or that the Sabbath was important, when clearly they were not.

We found ourselves drawn to Kahane in spite of ourselves because, unlike any other Jewish "leader" we had ever met, he was willing to say what needed to be said: that an ignoramus was an ignoramus, that a phoney was a phoney, that there really were things in this world worth fighting for. By coming out and giving Jewish voice to the painful truths about our Jewishness, truths we had previously heard only from those openly opposed to Judaism, he returned to us the belief that Judaism could have truth on its side, that it could be something we didn't have to be embarrassed about, that we should be proud to wear a *kippa* and make our stand on the world stage as Jews.

The numbers of students whom Kahane in this way inspired, cajoled and shamed into being better Jews and Zionists was certainly in the many tens of thousands.

NEITHER I nor any of my friends from college ever adopted Kahane's political views. We were never able to reconcile the Judaism we learned with his predilection for violent solutions to problems, nor with his abusive manner of presenting his case for these solutions.

But adopting someone's political views is not the only way of expressing gratitude to someone who changed our lives, thrilled and entertained us, helped us grow up into strong Jewish men and women. Many of us found other ways of doing what he asked.

For us, it has come time to say a most painful, heartfelt farewell.

The writer is a member of The Jerusalem Post editorial staff.