

Deadly Competition: A shadow on the future

By Moishe Rosen – presented by David Brickner

Abraham Cahan (1860-1951) may have been the most influential Jew of his time. Born in Lithuania, he had studied to be a rabbi like his father and grandfather, but found himself more inclined toward secular knowledge and became a schoolteacher instead. He emigrated to the U.S. in 1886. He was the editor of “The Jewish Daily Forward” newspaper from its founding until his death in 1951. One of his regular columns, which was established in 1906, was called “A Bintele Brief” (“The Bundle of Letters”), through which he became the “Dear Abby” of his day. In this column, he commented on all of Jewish life, giving family advice, talking to abandoned wives, disappointed husbands, giving a word of wisdom on how to raise children etc.

He received one letter from a heartbroken Jewish mother whose son and daughter-law “fell prey to the missionaries.” Seems that they had converted and were worshiping in the church, and nothing would persuade them away from their new religion. The mother wanted to know what could best be done about these pernicious missionaries who baited young Jews with friendship and job training.

In a personal, unpublished letter back to her, Abe Cahan gave her an answer that should give us pause today. He told the woman that any effort she made against the missionaries would only call attention to their work. He told her that in his personal study of the character of missionaries, he found that as they have small degrees of success, they have a tendency to turn on each other and fight for converts the way that shopkeepers fight for customers. But even more, they compete with each other for the contributions of Christians, which they need to keep their work going. He went on to say that these were people of low character and were self-destructive. ‘But if we fight them, they become noble, and defend one another, and actually gain strength among our Jewish people who are fair-minded.’¹ Well, Abraham Cahan knew human nature. The competitiveness of the missionaries themselves was far more destructive than anything the rabbis could say.

Was he wrong?

¹ Excerpt from memory of story related to Moishe Rosen by Harry Bucchalstein in 1967. Bucchalstein was in Cahan’s office at the Forward (sometime around 1919-1922), along with an advocate for publishing the letter. Bucchalstein argued against having it published and Cahan agreed.

In the beginning of the LCJE (Lausanne Consultation on Jewish Evangelism) when things were a little more informal, I broached the subject of unhealthy competition with several heads of missions. We were sitting in a pub in London, enjoying a pint, which seems to be a prerogative that the LCJE has reserved to itself. We raised a glass. “L’Chaim!” said one. “Skoll!” said another. “Slosh!” said Walter Barker. “Slosh?” we asked. “What does ‘slosh’ mean?” Dr. Barker answered, “I don’t know. I just felt like saying it.” That became the official LCJE toast!

If you were there and remember that event, perhaps you can remember the conversation and the way we enjoyed each other’s company. I felt free to express concern over competition between Jewish missions. Walter Barker and Murdo McCleod, CEO’s of the Church’s Ministry Among the Jews and Christian Witness for Israel respectively, listened to what I had to say, and then informed me, “Oh, that’s an American thing. We don’t have that over here.”

Unfortunately, that comment was wishful thinking at best—a fact that was subtly if unintentionally demonstrated when we met at Newmarket in England not too long after.

When I arrived at the conference, I was exhilarated to be with people who were my colleagues from around the world. Unfortunately, my stomach was not so thrilled as the rest of me and I had to spend more time than I would have liked behind closed doors in the men’s room. In came two or three people who were chatting and I found myself an involuntary eavesdropper. One piped up and said in what was clearly not an American dialect, “If you had an income of six million dollars, you could do a lot with that, too.” The other said, “Lord, could we!” Now, so far as I knew, there was only one ministry present at the conference that had an income of six million dollars, and that was Jews for Jesus.

I’m glad that I don’t know who the speakers were, but the attitude was all too familiar. They saw a mission doing a good work and attributed it to the funding they received. Why didn’t they see or say that the funding came because of an observably a good work? Why the need to make comparisons that marginalized the work of another mission?

I hadn’t yet delivered my paper, and although I’ve since forgotten the exact topic, I remember that we were talking about funding. As I read my paper, I pretended to read a section that wasn’t there. I said in my most positive voice, hoping all would hear and understand: “It’s a lot easier to raise money than it is to be worthy of it.” I have found myself repeating that axiom over and over again.

A competitive nature is not bad if it is an internal striving to be worthy of our calling and the support we receive. But if it is a striving to prove that we are greater, or others are less, so that we can build our reputation or finances at someone else’s expense, then it is deadly.

Why is Competition Deadly?

It prevents us from giving and receiving what we need from one another.

- how do you share ideas with those you regard as competition?
- how do you join in cooperative efforts with your competition?
- how do you give or receive encouragement and spiritual support from your competition?

It lessens the ministry we have to those who don't yet know Y'shua. Competition has us spending energy and resources on telling our own mission's story or our own congregation's story to those who can finance and pray for us and thus there are less resources to spend on outreach.

It stems from and leads to an unbiblical way of relating to one another, and prevents us from the kind of Holy Spirit power God wants us to operate under.

How does Competition Manifest Itself?

--when we insist on talking about the best way of doing evangelism (and the best way is never what "the competition" is doing)

--when we insist on talking about what doesn't work when doing evangelism (and what doesn't work is never what we're doing)

--when we won't let any organization get large enough or strong enough to perpetuate a messianic matrix or culture. We don't want to allow for excellence unless it is spearheaded by our own agency or congregation.

For example Moody Bible Institute has a strong but struggling Jewish Studies Course. Yet there are at least a half dozen ministries who want to undertake the task of providing bible training for Messianic rabbi's or mission workers.

A second example, there is not one of our organization's that has an effective scholar in residence or research library that can speak with authority. No one replaced Rachmiel Frydland or Moses Gitlin.

Fifty years ago there was an evangelist, a Jewish Believer known almost as widely as Billy Graham. His name was Hyman Appleman and he had the ear and respect of almost all of the church. Today he is barely known.

--when we dismiss others and promote ourselves as though our job is to determine the value of our own versus other people's work, instead of doing the best we can with the work that is before us.

--when we cast ourselves in the role of teacher to those who haven't consented to be our students.

Now as you listen to how competition manifests itself, were you prompted to think of other organizations and individuals who are guilty of one or more of these things? Or were you prompted to ask, “Lord, have I been guilty of any of these things?” That’s another way that competition manifests itself . . . It’s always someone else’s problem, isn’t it? Who is ready to say, “I’ve had a problem with competition and I’m afraid my problem is deadly to our efforts to see Jewish people saved.” ?

What is the Antidote?

We need to:

1. Realize our need for one another mitigates against the need for competition. We need prayer support as well as encouragement and assurance from one another. We need to face it. None of us conducts a ministry that is all that exciting all, or even most of the time. A good missionary might lead as many as a half a dozen Jews to faith in a year. But there are dry times, when nothing we do seems to work. It’s in those dry times that we can appreciate and encourage and pray for one another.

A corollary to the first point is the second:

2. Let iron sharpen iron

I’ve loved my experience with the LCJE because the LCJE brought me into contact with a quality of people I usually didn’t encounter. Who among us didn’t benefit from the energy of David Harley, the wisdom of Erv Kolb, the scholarship of Louis Goldberg, the philosophical outlook of Art Glasser? I could go down a whole list of people I’ve been enriched by at these conferences. It was at LCJE that I found people I could learn from.

We need to continue cultivating attitudes and atmosphere where these kind of interactions can take place, where we can benefit by the sharpness of others. If we want to sharpen others, we need to recognize our own need to be sharpened. We should always be open to what we might learn from someone else, regardless of their age or amount of experience.

And we need to ask ourselves if our sharpness is doing the other person good or harm. Some people don’t want to be sharpened. If you introduce your sharp point to them, it will only pierce them.

3. Rejoice over the accomplishments of others

I don't know how one person can be genuinely happy for the accomplishments of another while trying at the same to undermine or marginalize that person or his or her ministry.

And I don't know anyone who isn't pleased by the affirmation they receive when someone is genuinely pleased with them and for them for what they've accomplished.

It's easy to criticize. I know, I'm pretty good at it. I'd like to be just as good at seeing the good in others, and rejoicing. Rejoicing can be just as much fun and probably at least as helpful. More important, I've read in the Bible where God wants us to rejoice and though I can find biblical grounds to exhort, I'm still looking for the place where it tells me to criticize.

4. Recognize that together we can have a greater impact for the gospel than as individual missions.

Moody Bible Institute was able to have a Jewish department because missions and ministries worked together—the Jewish department later became the Department of Jewish Studies. Dozens of people were prepared for Jewish ministry at MBI.

In Europe, ministries to the Jews were decimated, not only by Hitler, but by the skyrocketing inflation which preceded his rise to power. Most of the missions in Poland and Hungary throughout Eastern Europe were supported by British missions. During the War, and right after the War, American missions came in and hired their staff so that ministries could continue. Unfortunately, that only lasted a brief time. If we can work together we can do much more than if we work separately.

Another example that is very personal to me is when Jews for Jesus offered to train people for service with other mission boards—people who would then go back and serve faithfully in our field but not in our mission. We did this a great deal on our witnessing campaigns and trained four workers for CMJ (The Church's Ministry among Jewish people). We conducted "Probe Campaigns" together in Europe and in Israel to find out what might be possible for outdoor ministries. I felt we were multiplying ourselves and the other mission organizations felt they had solid achievement as well.

5. Recognize competition for what it is and not tolerate it in ourselves or others.

We are part of the same body and yet competition can make us behave as though we have MS or some other kind of crippling disease where the parts of the body just can't function together. The shadow of deadly competition is that it is a degenerative disease that will have us hobbling along. The openness and

humility God wants us to have with each other give the freedom for the Holy Spirit to unite and empower us to move forward together.

6. Put a survival plan in place that will include others.

Competition keeps all of us from growing and building in such a way that our institutions survive. This is particularly deadly today as we face a diminishing of evangelical theology and monies and manpower which once was available to us but not goes elsewhere. We have damaged one another's character and our credibility and reputation for integrity has slipped so badly that we are not as believable as we need to be. In order to restore that credibility, we need to stop pushing ideas that make us sound like we are more than we are or doing more than we are doing.

David Brickner told me that he'd been part of a discussion where some wanted to hear what I had to say about deadly competition and its shadow on the future. But he added that those who were interested wanted to make sure I would not mention specific names of anyone involved in such contention. To me, this indicates just how deadly the rivalry has become.

In deference to their wishes, I will not mention any individual person. But you need to understand that the way to cleanse ourselves of this malady—the only way to do it—is for each of us to look within ourselves and to honestly identify what is evil and unhealthy.

I recognize that there is a big problem calling something evil, or attributing evil to people when it is not or perhaps may or may not be true. But if I came into a restaurant and I knew that half of the dishes were washed by a steam-cleaning dishwasher, and the other half were cleaned by the dogs licking them off, I would certainly want to know which dishes I was getting. We cannot afford to allow evil to be in our midst. If we do, it contaminates everything.

Part of what can cause a decline in Jewish evangelism is our unwillingness to speak the truth when it makes us uncomfortable to do so.

I suppose that none of us wants to be guilty of pointing a finger, because there is a fine line between pointing out someone else's destructive ways and being the one who is guilty of the exact same thing: badmouthing another mission. When I say badmouthing, I am including even the most "innocent" of questions meant to cast a shadow of doubt, or the quizzical lift of an eyebrow as though to question the good one person says of another's ministry. I call anything badmouthing even if it utilizes the most subtle or unsubtle means or aggrandize one person's own work over another's while undermining or marginalizing another. Sometimes in exposing one person's badmouthing, we might find we are badmouthing them in return.

Well, even if you don't want to be the one to expose another, you can recognize when you hear the kind of badmouthing I'm talking about. And you can tell the person, "I'm really not comfortable with this conversation." Or if you're not so tactful like me, you can just tell the person, "Don't you realize that the way you are talking about so and so is just the kind of talk that keeps us from being what God wants us to be. I've got to excuse myself from this conversation." And then flee.

I hope you will remember the way that Abraham Cahan characterized missionaries 90 years ago. Maybe you think that he overstated the case. But his impressions were based on his observations. What's the harm in examining ourselves on a regular basis, and looking for some ways to evaluate our hearts and our behavior, just to make sure that if he were among us today, he'd honestly be proven wrong?