

David Saperstein in Mobile



(Mobile Press Register photo by Dave Hamby)

Human challenge

Technological research poses ethical problems

By SYLVIA HART
Press Register Reporter

"To me, the greatest challenge facing the human race at this time is whether or not humanity will be able to place ethical controls on the development of new technologies."

THESE WORDS were spoken to participants in the latest session of the Mobile Area Jewish-Christian Dialogue at Spring Hill Avenue Temple by Rabbi David Saperstein of Washington, D.C., who is co-director of the Religious Action Center and associate director of the Commission on Social Action of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations and the Central Conference of American Rabbis.

Saperstein named three examples of technology which raise questions of whether ethical controls should be imposed: genetic engineering, government interference with the privacy of individuals and nuclear weapons.

ON THE SUBJECT of genetic engineering, the rabbi said that possibly "some time within this decade we will be able to do the kind of genetic surgery on human beings that may once and for all put an end to many forms of birth defects."

Many birth defects could be eliminated by recombining genes "so that if a gene is faulty we can recombine it in a new form that will be healthy."

Saperstein said the danger is that "once you have that technology, who decides who'll use it, and who will decide what is a defect and what is healthy?"

On the subject of individual privacy, Saperstein said that possibly within "this coming decade" technology will be available to deprive individuals of their privacy, with "Big Brother" (the government) controlling "what we do and what we say, limiting our ability to freely act."

HE SAID THAT if Americans now "have problems about preventing technology from taking away our freedom, then how much more so it is true for other countries that do not have the deep roots of freedom that are so fundamental to American existence."

Finally, Saperstein talked about technology in warfare.

He said, "We've always had warfare but

never the kind of warfare that can destroy this world, make it unlivable. The insanity of it is awesome and overwhelming."

SAPERSTEIN, WHO in addition to being a rabbi is an attorney and an adjunct professor at Georgetown University Law School in Washington, D.C., said, "Historians looking back on the 20th century will see our great moral blindness as being the nuclear arms race."

He said, "The only two things that stand between us and destruction are technological dependability — that we won't accidentally trigger by the malfunction of our technology a nuclear war — and human rationality — that will tell us a nuclear war is insane and therefore it should never, never, never be fought."

The speaker said he supports the proposed SALT II, or Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty, between the United States and the Soviet Union. The treaty must be ratified by the U.S. Senate to become effective.

"I've yet to hear a single argument in all my work in Washington that offers me a criticism of the treaty in which we will not be far better off with the treaty than without the treaty," said Saperstein.

He said that in particular areas of weaponry in which the Soviet Union is ahead, "without the SALT II treaty they're just going to go right on through" in developing Soviet superiority in these certain areas.

AS FAR AS THE ability of the United States and the Soviet Union to verify that each abides by SALT II, Saperstein said, "With the SALT treaty we know 85 to 95 percent of what we want to know. Without the SALT treaty we know 40 percent because they interfere with our national means of verification."

Today, said Saperstein, five countries with nuclear weapons are the United States, the Soviet Union, China, France and England. Additionally, Israel and India either have nuclear weapons or the capability for them.

BY THE END of this decade the expectation is that 35 countries will have nuclear capability, which means "35 fingers on the bomb."

Saperstein said, "Of all groups, we who have a religious tradition about what it means to be a human being, about the role of ethics in the world, it is incumbent upon us to be involved in dialogues with the scientific community, in dialogues with the political community, in dialogue with each other, soon to transform those dialogues into some kind of sensible action that will play at the controls in (these areas of) expanding technological development."