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Box  
22

Folder  
19

Yom Kippur eve sermon. "God and the Jewish People." 1959.

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## GOD AND THE JEWISH PEOPLE

Belief in God is the most difficult thing in the world, and the most important and indispensable, both.

It is the most difficult: because God is not present where He is most needed, in the Warsaw Ghetto and at the death of every forsaken saint and hero.

It is the most important: because without the belief and the assurance in a far-off god-like goal, the world is just debris and ashes.

Cardinal Newman said: We can't believe in God and we've got to believe in God.

We want a belief in God. We are not talking about respect for the fantastic powers of nature, nor about the ethics of the Ten Commandments. We want what Montague called "a momentous possibility." He said:

"Religion is the acceptance of a momentous possibility -- namely, that what is highest in spirit is also deepest in nature, that the ideal and the real are at least to some extent identified, not merely evanescently in our own lives but enduringly in the universe itself.

If this possibility were an actuality, if there truly were at the heart of nature something akin to us, a conserver and increaser of values, and if we could not only know this and act upon it, but really feel it, life would suddenly become radiant. For no longer shall we be alien accidents in an indifferent world, uncharacteristic by-products of the blindly whirling atoms; and no longer would the things that matter most be at the mercy of the things that matter least."

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Man is afraid and doesn't want to be alone. This is the title of Heschel's book "Man Is Not Alone". It is too horrible a thought. But does man then invent a God out of his need (as Voltaire suggested) or does he search and find the God who really is?

He does not invent -- he searches -- and comes up with ideas which satisfy some men and leave others still frustrated. For modern man most of the acknowledged and accepted definitions leave him frustrated. The crisis in the God-belief today is due to the inadequacy of our search. We must find new definitions -- the old ones are no good. What are some of the old ones?

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What definitions of God are there?

1. The traditional picture -- omnipotent, omniscient, etc.

Ex. 34:6

"The Lord, the Lord God, merciful and gracious, long-suffering and abundant in goodness and truth; Keeping mercy unto the thousandth generation; forging iniquity and transgression and sin."

THIS IS HARD TO BELIEVE.

MERCIFUL? WHERE WAS HE AT AUSCHWITZ?

WHERE IS HE AT TIMES OF PAIN, ILLNESS?

People ask, not only in Auschwitz but also in time of illness, Where is God? Loss of faith occurs when we see loved ones suffer.

(tell Koestler story)

THE AGE OF LONGING

Arthur Koestler

Suddenly to her own surprise, she heard herself talking in an even, almost bored voice:

"....During the war one wing of the school was transformed into a hospital. Some of us worked as auxiliary nurses. We had some plastic surgery cases -- mostly pilots who had no noses and looked liked obscene syphilitics. One had no lower jaw; one breathed through a rubber tube which came out of a hole in his throat. Some had to spend days with their arms or legs sewn to

their chins, to make a graft take -- curled up like overgrown embryos. Others had hands shrivelled up like birds' claws, other slept with open eyes like fish because they had no eyelids. One who had hardly any face left, only bandages like Wells' Invisible Man in the film, wrote on a slate before he died: 'To Hell with God. Yours sincerely.' I should have been horrified, but I found that I agreed with him, so I knew that I was lost. Perhaps I would have gotten over it nevertheless, but one day a girl in the school developed cerebral meningitis. She was only eight, but precocious, pretty and gay. She was very attached to me, so I insisted that I should be allowed to nurse her .. Cerebral Meningitis, as you perhaps know, produces a headache which is considered the severest pain caused by any natural disease. This child, who had the silly name Toutou, lay for eighteen hours on her back before she went into the final coma, and during those eighteen hours she kept turning her head without respite, and uttered every thirty seconds a certain cry -- a high-pitched bird-cry which is characteristic of cerebral meningitis. Just before she went into the coma she had a short moment of relief, and her eyes, which had already shown only their white, focused on me. I bent over her and said something silly about God's great love, and she whispered into my ear: "Hydie, Hydie, I am afraid -- because I think He's gone crazy and I am in His power." Then, as I said, she went into the coma and died three days later. But this idea of a child of eight got a strong hold on me, for at that time I believed that nobody else before had hit on it. It seemed to explain a lot of things: the sheer malign stupidity of the Power which had put that child on the rack and wrenched those inhuman bird-cries from it; the surrealist horrors of the plastic ward, and later on, the gas chambers and the death-trains with the chlorine. You see, I could not imagine myself as just tissue without heart and a mind, and maybe I can't even today. And <sup>pd</sup>nothing could happen without His will, and as those things kept happening, the only explanation was that God suffered from some malignant form of insanity....."

She stopped, pulled herself together and began to make up her face:

"There you are. A complete confession....."

But understandable as this is, it is wrong. Because by rejecting God for personal reasons, we also deprive ourselves of Him in cosmic terms. And then not only death, but also life, seems senseless and quixotic.

2. The philosopher's God -- Maimonides -- Ain Sof -- the ultimate -- the WITHOUT END -- we cannot penetrate his essence -- we can only define his negative attributes. We can't say what He is -- we can only say what He is not:

infinite            invisible

incomprehensible    immortal

This is not very satisfactory.

3. The hidden God -- Buber.

There is a dialogue between God and man.

There are times when God's beckoning finger is not seen in human history. At such times it is hard for man to feel himself addressed by God. God is hidden and we live in a time of darkness.

Is. 45

This is also not very satisfactory.

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What kind of a god can we posit that will be available to our desire -- yet will measure the test of aching hearts?

The most important test is that the God-idea must pass is the problem of evil. Since the existing world contains evil, on such a scale, from personal to international, what of God's alleged attributes of infinite power and perfect goodness? If the problem of evil is to be overcome, either one or the other of these attributes must be altered. Surely it would seem that since God does not abolish evil, it is either because he can't or he won't, which means that he is limited either in his power or in his goodness.

Most theologians feel that they must protect God's power at all costs -- otherwise men will disbelieve. And so they begin the contortions with which we are so familiar, in the Book of Job, for instance, wherein they try to explain away the evilness of evil. You know the answers given: perhaps evil is a mere illusion; perhaps it is good in disguise; perhaps it is a desirable and natural punishment for human sin; perhaps it is a lesson and an opportunity for human improvement; perhaps God's conception of goodness may be quite different from ours, etc., etc.

The soldier said the hell with God -- the child said perhaps He is crazy. They were revolting against the theory of a God who has infinite power yet permits evil. And they are right.

Perhaps it is time to resolve the question very boldly by altering the attribute of His power. Perhaps we should say He is not omnipotent, does not control, is struggling as we are struggling.

An attempt has been made by one of the greatest living Jewish theologians of our day, Dr. Slonimsky, to tackle the problem from that point of view -- and I think, with brilliant success. Here is Slonimsky's thesis:

God is not omnipotent. He cannot control evil, let alone eliminate it. He cannot help in our personal lives and crises.

God is not ONE -- there is no unity in God or the universe. The world is not run by a Master Spirit, but broken into two parts. God is represented in much the lesser part -- there is as much evil as good. A small portion is light -- the rest, darkness.

The name for this emerging light and goodness is God. Religion is the dramatic attempt to help God grow -- to enlarge the area of light, to overwhelm the darkness. The God whom we can use and make plausible must be struggling like us against the darkness we call evil. Some day He will win, and this deepest thought is expressed in Zech 14:9

on that day God will be one.

This means God is growing -- must be unified -- must be made One at the end of Time. God is at the end of the horizon -- not the beginning. God will be opparent at the end.

Belief is a reflex of behavior. You may say you don't believe in God, but if you act as though you do, you do. Shelley said he was an atheist, but his life, permeated as it was with a love of beauty and mankind, implied God. The assurance that truth, justice and love outlast everything is religion. God is the name for the sum of values, for the belief that love cannot die if it is real.

Values dare not and will not be lost. Effort cannot be lost -- it must add up to something. God cannot just evaporate. There must be conservations of heroic effort. There is no personal God who will pay off, in terms of reward or punishment -- but there can be no forgetting in a cosmic sense. In some half blind, stumbling way all effort must add up to something. It has to -- or we will all go crazy. This is a belief in a growing and emerging God -- who gets stronger all the time.

God is the name for the sum of values -- the sum of good men -- and the source of goodness in these men.

The process of God growing so that evil can be conquered is called history. History is the process by which we fight toward the messianic goal of the end of time. History is struggle, travail, tragedy, untold suffering, heroism and courage. History is bloody.

God needs help in this bloody process -- he needs a partner. Man is his partner. Meister Eckhart (German mystic of 13th century) summed it up: "God can no more do without us than we can do without him."

And so here is the picture -- a growing God, a finite God (not infinite in power), a God who can become realized and fulfilled only when Man cooperates with Him to overcome evil. God cannot do it alone. There is no God when man is evil. Man can destroy God. God without man is nothing.

Man together with God can conquer evil, and the partners can have each other for support in the long struggle upward toward the spiritual goal of human history. In the uphill fight good men shed blood and God will some day be made One by this human heroism. The unification of God's name, making Him One, is man's burden. The mystic poet Rilke offers just this kind of human help to a lonesome and sometimes helpless God.

"You, neighbor God, if sometimes in the night  
 I rouse you with loud knocking, I do so  
 Only because I seldom hear you breathe;  
 I know, you are alone.  
 And should you need a drink, no one is there --  
 to reach it <sup>to</sup> you, groping in the dark.  
 Always I hearken. Give but a small sign.  
 I am quite near.

And now to the second theme -- of which I spoke before on Rosh Hashona eve -- the role of the Jews in all this. If God needs man, the Jews are God's special men. This is what is meant by chosen -- not superiority -- but high and tragic destiny, filled with suffering, until God is One. The whole theme of Rosh Hashona is the making of God King through the mediation of his instrument, the Jews in human history. When they hate us, they hate God. When men will have stopped hating us, they will have stopped hating each other, stopped hating God, and the struggle against evil will be over.

The Jews were chosen arbitrarily. Love is blind -- it is destiny. Suffering is a mark of love. There is a hierarchy of suffering in the world. Man suffers most, of all the animals -- and the Jew suffers most, of all men.

Without this transcendental assumption, Judaism becomes an intolerable nuisance and a disaster -- something fantastically grotesque. Without this high sense of chosenness, being a Jew and suffering for it, is meaningless.



Slonimsky says, therefore, that the Jewish people has a theologic quality. The people has a Theological status as God's special ones -- sharing His fate -- struggling with him. On high occasions this is full of bliss and grandeur, as at Sinai -- other times it is dire and black and terrible, as in the death-furnaces. The chosenness is always in the nature of a burden from which there is no escape, as Jonah could not escape.

It is a terrible and a blessed thing, a thing both of terror and of bliss to be born a Jew. Because of the mere fact of birth, one steps into a religious role and is made part of a tremendous destiny by God.

This singling out of a certain people and giving it theological status may be objected to on the basis that individual specimens of that people are the same as the general run of humanity, capable of the same evils, filled with the same weaknesses, in no way superior. The objection is as obvious as it is pointless. Theological status does not attach to the individual Jew, but to the group, the idea, the corporate entity of Israel.

That special dignity, that religious quality which it might seem monstrous and arrogant to claim for a living people is merely the formula for the immense Shicksal or Destiny of that people. The role reserved for that people, to unify God's name, is so terrible in the cost and sacrifice entailed, that no less a status than this transcendental one can be awarded to such a group. Individual members may be heroic or frightened, majestic or vulgar, godlike or dismayed -- but to the group as a psycho-physical unit inures the awesome role.

And so we have it. God and His special people suffer together as they struggle toward the good. The choosing God and the chosen people are both forced to struggle -- are both constantly having a bad time -- are both often defeated -- and must both be heroic beyond all dimensions required of anyone else.

We believe in the one God -- but His unity is something to be achieved through heroic effort and tragic trial. He is not One yet.-- He sometimes is defeated by evil. But we believe that His unification, His conquest of evil is the goal of all history.

We believe that the goal of history is the messianic age for mankind -- the integration of mankind through the abolition of hate and poverty and misery and war -- the integration of mankind in the higher plane of a new life, when time will really begin and a new dimension of existence.

We believe that history is a struggle between good and evil, that God is slowly growing stronger in this struggle -- that man is His partner and every heroic act of man adds to God's strength.

We believe that of all men the Jews are branded by a special selection, and that through their patient stubborn suffering they bear witness that God's struggles are not in vain,

If these are our beliefs -- about our God and our people -- then each one of us who is part of this God and people has the choice of accepting or rejecting for himself and his family the full implications. The people cannot renege on its role -- individuals may find a way, if the path be too thorny, to secede.

For those who choose to leave, there is the door of assimilation through which they can pass into the great world outside, and perhaps even successfully overcome the twinges of conscience, so that they blend into the vast ocean of mankind, and like little drops are lost in the surging swells. Thus they may escape the danger, and also the glory.

For those who choose to stay, there is the high proud road of affirmation, the warmth of comrades marching always into danger, the exaltation of unique destiny, the sense that one's own life is part of a cosmic adventure, in which the stakes are the vastest imaginable -- the very fate of mankind itself.

Do you know the song which the Jews sang on the death-trains, the death-marches, the death-camps, even up to the door of the gas chamber and the oven? "I believe with perfect faith in the coming of the Messiah." Imagine this! They were telling the fiends, the human devils, that God and they would yet win -- and if there was any humanity at all in any of the Nazi beast-men, that humanity must have wept. And must have known that through the strength and stubbornness of these Jews it would some day be released toward its own fulfillment.

Who can advise -- who can say? There is no need to, actually. Some among us will drift off and disappear, without being told. No loss. The rest of us will remain, tied to our fate, linked to our destiny, knowing that as servants of the Lord, and often suffering servants, we are in reality the freest, bravest, happiest of all men -- for if we win, we win the universe -- and if we lose, and all of this was for nought, it is only because God Himself loses. What better gamble?