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THE JEWISH WORLD-VIEW

To make intelligible a Jewish understanding of Jewish-Christian relations, it is necessary to expatiate on the assumptions which underlie this approach, and which derive from distinctive emphases within Judaism. Jewish Heilsgeschichte perceives the Exodus from Egypt and the Covenant at Mount Sinai as the crucial mythos which undergird the faith and life of Israel as a messianic people. The Exodus brought about a spiritual transformation, but the preconditions for the liberation of the spirit involved an actual, physical liberation from the material conditions of slavery. The Exodus in itself was incomplete, Jewish tradition asserts, without its culmination at Sinai.

At Sinai, God and Israel were bound to each other by an Eternal Covenant. Under the terms of the Covenant (in Hebrew, Bris), Israel has agreed, in return for God's providential care, to serve "as a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" - that is, to seek to realize the Divine Will by carrying out a task of redemption in the world, to be climaxed by the coming of the Kingdom of God. The holy task to which the Jews committed themselves at the foot of Mount Sinai is to live as a model society, a concrete, existential fulfillment of the teachings of the Torah, so succinctly summarized in the words of the prophet Micah: "to do justice, to love mercy, to walk humbly

with thy God." Thus, the essence of Judaism is the hallowing of this life. The messianic redemption of the future, which is patterned on the Exodus redemption, cannot be genuine if it does not involve both physical as well as spiritual liberation.

The Torah, which comprises the Five Books of Moses, detailed the religious commandments (mitzvos) and the moral and legal precepts of Judaism. Regarded as the supreme authority for all human conduct, the Torah is conceived of by Jews as dynamic since its teachings are developed continuously throughout the ages. These teachings are supplemented by the wisdom and insights of successive generations, the Oral Tradition, or Torah She' be'al Peh. The capstone of this oral tradition is the Talmud, which is a vast compendium of the discourses of the Rabbis and their decisions covering the creative period of Pharasaic Judaism from roughly 30 B.C. to 500 A.D. It is regarded as the guide in religious practices and ethical behavior, covering with a network of morality all the circumstances and everchanging situations of daily life and moment-to-moment conduct.

Crucial to the religious commitment of every Jew is the study and interpretation of the Torah and the Talmud, which is no less important than prayer or ritual observance. The esteem associated with study is reflected today in Jewish

devotion to the life of the intellect.

Thus, Rabbinic Judaism - on which all versions of contemporary Judaism are founded - is a fusion of various currents: the Pentateuchal codes; the teaching of the Prophets of Israel regarding justice, compassion, loving kindness; the emphasis of the Psalms on individualistic piety and passion for God; and the practical, homely wisdom of Proverbs. The total result of this Rabbinic synthesis was the unique development of a system of ethical and spiritual teachings that covered all the ordinary conditions of life, seeking to render these conditions decent, just, kindly, and honorable. There would be an incredibly happier and lovelier life in the world to come or in the day of the resurrection of the dead, the Rabbis believed, but meanwhile there was life on earth, and this life has its value and its happiness, its justified blessings and enjoyments which could be hallowed and sanctified by religion.

One of the great religious figures of the 20th century was the late Chief Rabbi of Israel, Abraham Isaac Kook. A mystic who yearned for complete, harmonious holiness, he refused to differentiate between the sacred and the secular. Rabbi Kook taught that "all things essential to human life were potentially sacred." He viewed scientific progress as part of the intellectual growth of mankind. If science appeared to undermine religion, this was no reason, in itself,

to suspect its ultimate value. What was wrong was not the advance of science but the fact that religious thinking had not kept abreast intellectually, nor had learned how to harness its findings for human purposes.

"Normal mysticism" was the phrase coined by Rabbi Kook to describe the mystical urge for unity that was meant to combine the communicable with the ineffable, and to infuse the physical life of man with religious purpose. He taught that the Jewish religion embodies the twin elements of prophecy and halacha (religious law). The prophetic tradition has given to Judaism its passion, its preoccupation with human affairs, its criticism of social evils and abuses. Halacha has furnished discipline, a pattern of conduct which involved Judaism inextricably in human civilization. As an exponent of Hasidism, the Chief Rabbi emphasized the need to seek to "bring heaven down to earth," teaching that the meaning of mystical experience is to acquire the ability to savor heaven in everyday life, because nothing mundane is alien to the holy.

One of the decisive creations of Rabbinic Judaism was that of the Jewish liturgical calendar which became the unique "catechetical" instrument in the formation of the Jewish personality and of religious-communal life. All of the Jewish festivals, fasts and holy days have been celebrated for more than 2,500 years as living experiences, acts of present-day

commitment, rather than nostalgic reminiscences. Passover, the celebration of the exodus from Egypt, is thus conceived of by Jews as a present-day reenactment of the liberation from slavery. "For we were slaves to Pharaoh in the land of Egypt..." declares every Jew during Passover at the annual family Seder service. Similarly, Shavuous (Pentecost) epitomizes an annual reaffirmation by every Jew of his acceptance of the Covenant revealed at Mount Sinai and a recognition that the Revelation is continuous.

The observance of these festivals, fasts and holy days is a collective act of the community of Israel, the people of God, and not a performance of private devotion. It is for this reason that the Jewish Sabbath and holidays, as well as the personal events of birth or marriage, are never restricted to the home or to the synagogue but are celebrated partly in each. Some are centered more in the home and some more in the community, but any major event is shared with the group as the extended family of God.

This central emphasis in Judaism on the community of Israel led Martin Buber to observe that in Jewish theology the organized Jewish community has religious significance. The injunction to be "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" Buber noted, involved not only the behavior of individual members of the people, but the dedication to God of the nation, "with all its substance and all its functions, with legal forms and institutions, with

the organization of its internal and external relationships." The idea of nationality accordingly belongs to the divine scheme of things. There is no virtue in nationalism as such, Buber declared: it is "holy and righteous" only if it is animated by the longing for perfection.

Jewish nationality whose origins are grounded in the Biblical concept of the "chosen people" was conceived of by the Rabbis not as a reward or special privilege but as a Divine claim and challenge which required of the people of God the obligation to work and toil with utmost devotion to further the Divine ideal of human perfection.

This conception of the particular vocation of the nation of Israel is inextricably linked with the Jewish theology of pluralism. As an ethical monotheistic religion, Judaism is universalistic in its vision of the ultimate future of humanity. Chief Rabbi Kook stated, "Mankind should unite as one family and then all strife and vice that are born of division of the peoples will disappear." But, he added, it would be disastrous to mistake the hoped-for vision for the present reality. "Man cannot fly off to paradise simply by uttering a word of faith." Much educational work must be done before men are able to reach out to the visionary universalistic future. This work, he noted, should be done through existing national communities, each striving toward the future and final messianic goal.

Presupposed in these views is the classic Rabbinic discussion over Judaism's views toward conversion and salvation. There is no unanimity in Judaism regarding the ultimate conversion of the Gentiles for which the Synagogue daily prays:

"Let all the inhabitants of the world perceive and know that unto Thee every knee must bend and every tongue give homage. Before Thee, O Lord our God, let them bow down and worship; and unto Thy glorious Name let them give honor."

To most Rabbis this "conversion" implied conversion to Israel's God rather than to Israel's cult. There is no Jewish counterpart to salus extra ecclesiam non est ("there is no salvation outside the Church"). It is a fundamental doctrine of Judaism that "the righteous men among the nations" will be saved, and therefore from this point of view of the Synagogue, it was made unnecessary to convert non-Jews to Judaism. "Whoever professes to obey the seven Noahide laws (Of universal morality) and strives to keep them is classed with the devout among the Gentiles, and has a share in the world to come," the great 12th century Jewish philosopher, Maimonides, taught (Mishneh Torah IV). The salvation of the children of Noah--that is, pre-Israelite mankind--depended on the observance of the following seven commandments: to practice justice; to avoid blasphemy, idol-worship, murder, theft, sexual immorality, and cruelty to animals. Whoever kept these laws was called a "God-fearer." It was the duty of the Jews to

encourage the universal acceptance of the "Seven Laws of the Sons of Noah." Theologically speaking, Judaism does expect a redeemed mankind to be strict monotheists--in the Jewish sense.

The ultimate conversion of the world was understood by the Rabbis as one of the "messianic events." While there have been many differing conceptions of the Messiah in Judaism, all Jewish concepts share in common the view that the Messiah brings about a change in the kind of life being lived on earth and not just in the inner life of the individual. Wars and persecution must cease, and justice and peace must reign.

In this context there developed in Rabbinic Judaism the seeds of a Jewish theology of Christianity which held that a righteous Gentile Christian would qualify as "a righteous man among the nations of the world" and therefore has "a share in eternal blessedness." Maimonides spoke of Jesus (and of Mohammed) as being preparatio messianica in that they and their adherents have brought the words of the Torah to the distant ends of the earth. (Hiklhoth Melakhim, Chapter 11, Constantinople edition).

"The Christians believe and confess, as do we," Maimonides wrote (Pe'er HaYodot 50), "that the Bible is of Divine origin and was revealed to our teacher Moses; only in the interpretation of Scripture do they differ." In a letter to his pupil,

Hasdai ha-Levi, the great sage added, "In regard to your question concerning the Gentile nations, you should know that God demands the heart, that matters are to be judged according to the intent of the heart. There is, therefore, no doubt that everyone from among the Gentiles who brings his soul to perfection through virtues and wisdom in the knowledge of God has a share in eternal blessedness."

With this understanding of major features of Biblical and Rabbinic Judaism, it should be clearer why Jewish festivals, fasts and holy days play such a crucial role in shaping Jewish consciousness.

