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The Universality of God, 1915.

Wheeling - 11-15-1915

Rabbi Silver On "The Universality of God"

At the Eoff street temple Friday evening Rabbi A. H. Silver delivered an interesting sermon dealing with "The Universality of God." He told how employment of child labor might make the world a better place and how they might give little children the rights they are denying them, if they only knew a little more about God.

Rabbi Silver said: "Verily God is in this place and I did not know it." In the mind of the primitive man the deity originally was associated with the place of his worship. He was bound up with the mountain, the cave, the well in the rock where his shrine was erected. These physical objects were ever looked upon as the deities themselves. There was no freedom of locomotion for the gods of early man. They were incarcerated in their own images. They were the prisoners of their own shrines.

The second stage in the religious development of man was characterized by the fact that gods were able to leave their abodes and for a time work their will in other localities. Their original homes, however, required their permanent dwelling places while their sojourns abroad were but of temporary duration.

But this new quality which was attributed to the gods—the quality of movement—was a momentous one. If the power of the deity is no longer restricted to his immediate environment, if his will can be made manifest away from home, what is there to check the growth of the idea that the deity may be all powerful and omnipresent, that his power may permeate all things and his presence be all pervasive?

The second stage in religious thought, therefore, leads directly into the third—that of the universality of the gods, and this concept culminates in yet a fourth one—the prophetic idea in which gods give way to God; the idea of man's thesis is of one omnipotent being, whose presence is manifest in the whole of reality.

The story which I read this evening from the twenty-eighth chapter of Genesis illustrates a God—conception which rightly belongs in the second stage of religious evolution. Jacob in his wanderings through the land of Canaan, stumbles across a holy place, a magon, the habitat of a deity. He is unaware of it at first. Night coming on Jacob selects one of the sacred stones the place for a pillow and lies down to sleep. The Deity appears to him during the night in a dream and reveals His name to Jacob, coupled with the promise of guidance and protection for himself, Jacob, and of prosperity for his descendants. Then Jacob awoke from his sleep and exclaimed, "Verily God is in this place and I did not know of it," and he was afraid and said, "How beautiful is this place; this can be none else but the house of God and the gate of heaven." So he took the stone upon which he had slept and set it up as a sacred pillar or monument and anointed it with oil.

It is apparent from the narrative that the Deity is still the God of a specific locality; that the Deity revealed Himself to Jacob only because Jacob had accidentally come upon His dwelling place and that only this sacred place was "the house of God and the gate of heaven." And yet this narrative related in classic simplicity has somehow always appealed to me. It seemed to detect in it, in spite of its religious immaturity, symptoms of great truth. Looked at as a simple patriarchal legend apart from its historical background, the story may be interpreted to yield much food for thought.

Jacob, who was by nature a "tent dweller" and who had never left his home before, is now wandering, alone and sorrow laden, through strange lands among strange peoples. At home in Beersheba, he knew that he was under the protection of his God; for had not God revealed Himself to his father Isaac there? But now away from Beersheba,

he experiences that vagueness; he is a prey to the thought that his God is not with him now that he is away from home. He lies down and through the magic of the new thought is borne in upon his God is with him there in the open sky, in the lonely waste as surely as He was with him at home; that this desolate wilderness is as surely "the house of God and the gate of heaven" as the fertile fields and the well of Beersheba, and that the ladder whose head reaches to the throne of God may be found anywhere in the great world of God, anywhere and everywhere, and Jacob awakens to the realization of this great truth, and wonderingly exclaims, "Verily God is in this place and I did not know it."

The fate of Jacob overtook also his descendants—the children of Israel. Driven by the iron rod of Rome, the children of Israel were forced to leave their homes and their temple and wander away into the great world that looked like a vast wilderness to them, even as the road from Beersheba to Horan appeared to Jacob. They were crushed in body and in spirit. They were despondent and depressed. They felt that they had been driven from the presence of God, for did not God dwell in Jerusalem? They echoed the plaint of David when he was an exile among the Philistines, feeling from the wrath of Saul, "They have driven me out this day from abiding in the inheritance of the Lord." But soon the great souls among the people, the men in whose bosoms adversity had not extinguished the fire of will and of courage, the will to live and the courage to face the tribulations of exile, had a vision and behold, they saw the ladder whose head reaches to the throne of the Almighty standing in their midst, and they awoke with a start to the perception of the great truth, and triumphantly exclaimed, "Verily God is in this place, in this exile, in this heartbreaking, spirit-crushing, soul-corroding eternal wandering, in this blinding sorrow and burning pain, in this Gehennah of rancor, spite and malevolence; yes, God is in this place and we did not know it." Here is "the house of God," where we must worship in the full fervor of our devotion here in the great world of men, where prejudice blinds judgment, where ignorance stifles love, where hatred breeds strife, here is "the house of God," whither we must bring our offerings and our sacrifices, our love and our labor. This vast arena of the world, where the peoples of the earth writhe in the agonies of a new birth, this is "the gate of heaven."

And stirred by the potency of this new truth, Israel set about building a new Jerusalem, a Jerusalem whose limits are the ends of the earth, whose foundations are justice and truth, whose towers and pinnacles are human aspirations and in whose temple the thousand voiced choir of humanity will sing the praises of the God of Justice and of Love.

In exile, in sorrow and in suffering men have sometimes found God and a vision of "the gate of heaven." In the wreck and ruin, the pain and the passion, the fever and fury of the terrible war that is devastating Europe, some men have found God. I read of a British captain, wounded in the war, who asserts with deep conviction and sincerity that the war has been a spiritual bath for many a soul, a crucible in which men were purged of the evils and vices that accrued to them in the comfort and luxury of peace. I listen to the impassioned words of a private in the French army, who claims to have been baptized by blood and iron into a life of nobility and spirituality. I hear of thousands who have experienced the thrill of altruism, of self-sacrifice, of the sensation of dying for a great cause for the first time in their lives. I read of tens of thousands praying in the blood drenched trenches, whose lips had never moved in prayer before, and somehow I am forced to exclaim, "Verily God is in this place and I did not know it."

The tragedy of the trenches is this: That humanity should be compelled to pay such an awful price for this spiritual rebirth. Why could not the institutions of peace be made so glorious as to call forth an equal spiritual passion in the hearts of men? Are there not abundant needs of sacrifice and altruism in the peaceful pursuits of life?

How resplendent with new beauty our own lives would be if we would but

truth that God can we worship in the shop and in the factory, in the office and in the store, in the field and in the mine, in the school and in the home, with the spade as with the hymn, with the ledger as with the prayer book! Some day men will be moved by the great vision, and the employer will then look to his ledgers and his pay envelopes, to the comfort and health of his workmen and exclaim, "Verily God is in this place and I did not know it." And the laborer will then look upon his work with the eye of an artist and not of a serf, and he will realize that his task is "the house of God and the gate of heaven." Then labor will rise as a monument dedicated to the service of God.

Some day men will look for the ladder that leads heavenward, not only in the temples and in charitable bequests, but in the thousand situations of life, humble as they may be. Then the glass manufacturer who mutilates the handiwork of God by stunting the growth of little souls in his factory will look into the frightened eyes of one of these little ones of whom is the kingdom of heaven, and seeing that haunted look, that weary look, that hopeless look, that look which speaks of the hunger for the little joys of life which he denied it, he will break down and sob and rising, a better man, he will say, "Verily God is in this place and I did not know it—this is the house of God where I must worship—this is the only gate that can lead my soul to heavenly felicity."

When the vision comes, fathers and mothers will realize that every home may be a "house of God" and "a gate of heaven;" that the ladder of spiritual joy and happiness can rise from the fire side where love reigns as from the holy of holies in the temple.

When the vision comes, men will cease from seeking God, as the children in quest of the bluebird, far and distant lands, in a world distant from the everyday one; but return to their daily tasks and duties, they say, "Verily God is in this place and I did not know it."