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Judaism and Ethical Culture, 1919.

LECTURE BY RABBI ABBA H. SILVER ON "JUDAISM
AND ETHICAL CULTURE," AT THE TEMPLE, CENTRAL
AVENUE AND EAST 55th STREET, SUNDAY, MARCH
2nd, 1919, CLEVELAND, OHIO.

There are two fundamental conditions in ethical culture: one, the supremacy in human life beliefs to moral conduct. Righteous conduct holds the place of pre-eminence in human relationships; and, secondly, that morality, the good life, is not necessarily dependent upon theology, upon the belief in the existence of God. Now, with the first of these principles, or convictions, Judaism, of course, has and can have no quarrel. Judaism from the very earliest times has assigned the place of priority and pre-eminence in life not to belief of faith, but to conduct--the ethical life. Christianity as Paul formulated its theology, declares the crying fact in human life is belief that salvation is conditioned by one's belief that salvation cannot be gained through righteous conduct only, but that belief in the creed or the document as enunciated by him and as adopted by the church is a pre-requisite to salvation.

Now, nowhere in the bible and nowhere in the rabbinic writings do you find a command, "Thou shalt believe," you find no such command in the Decalogue, "Thou shalt believe in the Lord." Judaism has emphasized the thought that man is elevated and exalted solely through

the moral conduct and the moral experiences of his life, --not creed but deed; not the hollow dogma, but the hallowed life is what Judaism has preached. Because of that Judaism has at all times preached the ideal of the worthwhileness of human life, the reality of human experiences, the dignity of human relationship. Judaism has never depreciated life. It has never maintained that life is one cesspool of corruption; that man is a bundle of sins and errors, and that man must escape from life in order to be saved. I have spoken of that over and over again, because that thought is fundamental to a proper conception of Jewish theology. Judaism has cast a halo of glory and sanctified and dignified human life, and therefore it has made righteous conduct and morality the fundamental, pre-eminent facts of human life.

So that ethical culture, when it adopts this principle of Judaism, is furthering the objects of our faith. The founder of ethical culture is most ready to acknowledge its almost complete indebtedness to the moral conceptions of the prophets of Israel. He says over and over again that the morality of ethical culture has as its source and mainspring the genius of the prophets of Israel. On that point we are one. And the ethical culture societies, in making moral conduct the aim and goal, have done a most noble and a most praiseworthy service. In the short period of their existence, dating back only to 1876, the ethical culture societies have

actually contributed a great deal to the uplift of certain inner communities, to the development of a more modern pedagogy for the training of the young, to the inculcation of sound, moral principles in the hearts of men and women. As such the ethical culture society has justified its existence. It has been an agent and an instrument of God.

But it is with the second contention that Judaism take issue, that the moral life is independent of God. Mind you, ethical culture is not anti-religious. Ethical culture does not deny the existence of God. Ethical culture is not even agnostic. Doctor Adler, who is the founder of the ethical culture movement, is himself a deeply religious man, believing in God, as you and I; but the contention of ethical culture is that you can have a moral code and an ethical culture standard devoid of any theologic content--that society may set up for its goal the ethical society and not necessarily God. And the ideal that unites the men and brings them into a fellowship of ethical culture is not one theology or another, one creed or another, but the moral passion for righteousness, the desire to develop themselves and help others to develop themselves morally.

Now, Judaism maintains that you cannot have a moral code without presupposing the existence of God. Mind you, I do not say that a man cannot be moral without believing in God. You and I know of many men who are exemplary in their moral lives, and yet do not believe in

God. But then you and I know of many men who do believe in God and who are not exemplary in their moral conduct. Just as it is possible to be moral without believing in God, so it is possible to believe in God and be immoral. When I say "possible" I mean that there are men of that type. We maintain that both positions are illogical, types of that both men have not become conscious of the full implications of their positions. We maintain and Judaism maintains that no man can be truly religious without at the same time being truly moral, and that no man can be truly moral without at the same time being truly religious. But we do recognize the fact that men may be moral without having reasoned out the why and the wherefore of their morality, and that men may lead moral lives because of social pressure or public opinion, or discipline, or training, or habit--for a thousand and one reasons--without having themselves critically analyze the reasons for the moral conduct in their moral lives. It is when we begin to ask the why and the wherefore that we are driven back upon the concept of God.

The position of Judaism is this: unless you believe that there is an intelligent guiding and controlling spirit in the world, that assures for you the worthwhileness for you of your moral endeavors, that guarantees, as it were, for you the interest upon the investment of your tears and your sufferings and your labors--unless you believe that there is a spirit outside of ourselves that makes for righteousness, unless you believe that your

efforts will never prove futile, that your endeavors will never be in vain, that your sacrifices can never be entirely for no account, because there is a God, a spirit that assures the moral purpose and the moral goal of the universe, your efforts, your exertions and your agonies of mind and soul will be in vain. Why should man choose the good when the good involves depredation and suffering? If life is dominated by fate? If we are not conscious in ourselves that there is a spirit that propels us, and urges us to do the right thing? And if that spirit will see that our righteous acts will tell, why should a man endeavor to develop himself at great cost, at cost of tremendous discomfort to himself or great sacrifice, if there is not in the world a guiding spirit that counts our efforts and gives unto them an ultimate effectiveness and purposefulness? Why should we try to build a more perfect society for the future and at the same time suffer ourselves? Who knows what that future will be? Who knows whether our efforts are not after all merely blind gropings leading nowhere? God is the axiom of the moral life.

Mr. James, in his psychology of religious experience, sums up this thought when he says, "God's existence is the guarantee of an ideal order that shall be permanently preserved." God may be merely a postulate of our moral life; but without God there can be no moral life for society. Dr. Adler, the founder of ethical culture, himself recognizes this fact--that you cannot build up a beautiful structure without first founding an

enduring basis for it, which is God. And so he says, "So I believe that there is a higher Being, an ultimate divine reality in things. This Being is not like a man, is not he, or she, or it; did not make the world as a carpenter makes a table, or as an architect builds a house. In attempting to describe this Being language fails, imagination grows dizzy, thought is paralyzed." On moral grounds and in the last analysis on moral grounds only, I assume the existence of such a being. All that I can say by way of description is that there really exists that which corresponds to the moral ideal, that there is a power back of the efforts towards righteousness which gives effect to it beyond our finite powers .

Now, if it is true that ethical culture, when driven to a logical conclusion must likewise believe the existence of God, wherein does it differ from Judaism? It differs in this one thing: ethical culture maintains that we know so little about God that God cannot become the motive, the driving force of our ethical life, the pattern of our moral endeavors--it is too transcendent, too far removed, language cannot express Him, thought cannot grasp Him; He is, but we know nothing of Him. And so the ideal of the ethical culture life cannot keep God, but it must have a deified society, a social organization perfected in the future, having all area, and all power, and all glory of the ideal moral state and duty that must be the driving, motive power of one's ethical life.

While it is true that we can know little of God, Nabonidus many centuries ago said that you cannot apply to God any attributes of goodness, or greatness, or power, because every attribute that you employ is a human attribute, and God is not human. The only thing that you can say of God is that He is. You can postulate existence and nothing else. But at the same time how much can we postulate of an ideal society? What do we know what human society a hundred thousand years from today would be? Is the ideal society anything more real, more apparent, more inspiring, possessing more driving and compelling power than God? Just because we cannot know much of God, is there any reason why we must relegate Him to a position of supreme transcendence, entirely out of contact and touch of our daily lives and our daily needs? Just because our little life is hemmed in with mystery, and will for all time remain shrouded in mystery, is that any reason why we must say that God is absolutely out of relation with us?

The founder of ethical culture would set up the moral law as the supreme thing in life before which men must prostrate themselves. But men can never worship a law; men do not prostrate themselves before the law of gravitation--they obey, willingly or unwillingly. But it cannot become a force in their lives, it cannot help them; it cannot comfort them, it cannot inspire them, it cannot goad them on to the supreme height of sacrifice. A law is merely a descriptive thing; it is not a dynamic

force. Judaism says if God must be postulated as the cause of the moral life, as the surety and guarantee of the moral life, then God may also be postulated as the ideal, the driving force, the urge, and the impulse and the goal of our moral life. And that is why Judaism says, "Ye shall be holy." Why? Because, "I, the Lord, your God, am holy." Judaism says, "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself." Why? "For I am the Lord." "It is My law--the moral law--that expresses itself in your lives. You become conscious of Me--of practicing and obeying the moral law. And moral law is My channel of revelation, the technic through which I move and act and become realized in your lives."

And the rabbis have said man is made in the image of God. Certainly God is not a physical Being that man can be made in His image. But "Just as I am merciful so be thou, O man, merciful; just as I am gracious, so be thou gracious; just as I am just, so be thou just." God is the pattern of human life, and the ideal of human life is the imitation of God. We ascribe unto God, it is true, all that is finest in our own lives,--all our efforts and all our powers raised to the nth degree. That is God, and that is all we can know of God, and that is all we need to do about God. Judaism believes in good for its own sake; in doing good without expecting reward. One of the rabbis said, "Be not slaves who serve their masters in order to receive their reward; but be like men who serve their leader without expecting any

reward." But Judaism has always assumed the existence of God as the attestation, the guarantee, the sanctification of our moral existence.

Now, what prompted ethical culture into being is the fact that it desires to bring men together for moral activities without any reference to their theologic beliefs. That is praiseworthy; that is an old thing. But why must you organize a new religion for that purpose? The religious fellowship is not the only fellowship in our life. Jew and Gentile may be united into many another fellowship for the sake of moral activity. If ethical culture were merely a society aiming to bring men of all faiths and creeds together for the sake of doing, for experimenting with certain moral features, then there would be no complaint to be made of it, and its effectiveness and usefulness would have been much greater today,--if it had endeavored merely to supplement the church, to add something to it. But when it sets out to substitute the church, to become a church in itself and a religion by itself, it must fail. It must fail. Ethical culture attacks dogma--dogma has brought great sin into the world, dogma has turned man against his brother, dogma has been responsible for wars, for bloodshed, for tyranny. That is true. But Judaism has never preached dogma. It was only with the rise of Mohammedanism and the propaganda of Christianity when Judaism was compelled to defend itself against attack from other religions, that it was called upon to formulate principles into certain creeds. But

these dogmas were never binding; these dogmas never carried the authority of a sinner that declared it to be representatively Jewish. A creed is necessary. And Dr. Adler himself says, "We do not say that creed is unimportant. On the contrary, one should try to think out his own creed; but no one should attempt to force his creed upon another." If you want to have a unified life, you must devolve your own creed. You cannot go through life merely doing certain moral acts without experience and uninitiated. There must be a unified principle in your life, and that is a creed.

Judaism has that creed, and that creed is not swathed in dogmas that are anti-scientific. Judaism is ultra-scientific. It is science plus. But it is not anti-scientific. And Judaism has been able to withstand the onslaught of all scientific discoveries for the last one hundred years, and Judaism will be able to withstand, nay, to welcome all the discoveries of science for a thousand years to come, without in any way hurting its fundamental soundness of mind and soul.

Ethical culture is a religion according to the founder and the disciples. That may be a great concession to religion. We have always maintained that you cannot have religion without ceremonies and without ritual and without rites. We have always maintained that man cannot live merely with an abstract system or code of ethics. That is logical. This is revolutionary to this code. It is not stimulating, it is not helpful. Man needs the

warmth, the enthusiasm, the thrill of a religion, and therefore man needs the ceremonies and the symbol and the ritual. All life, in a sense, is symbol and ceremony. Speech is a symbol and thought is a symbol. And the ritual of the religion is merely the rythm of the religion; and the ceremonies of the religions are merely the dramatized impulses of a religion and the symbols of the religions are merely the music of a religion. When people think the same way, they would ultimately come to act in a certain definite way, and in the course of time that will become congealed in religious ceremony in a certain religious drama; and they are helpful, decidedly helpful, so much so that ethical culture itself has begun to adopt them. Ethical culture asks its adherents to attend service on Sunday morning. They are not called services, but they really are services. There are introduced into the services music and readings and closing words that take the place of prayers, and the ethical culture societies of England have even departed from all formal ritual of their services and have solemnized marriages, they have officiated at death, they have even adopted a sort of a baptism, the naming of a child. They have founded their Sunday Schools, they have endeavored to take over all those worthwhile institutions of the church, proving conclusively that these are the essentials of human life, absolute essentials of human life. In fact, Dr. Adler, complains in one of his lectures, "By virtue of these tasks it is an institution

as sacred to its members as any church. Its public exercises, indeed, are simple, and are lacking in the charm and grace possessed by older institutions.

Perhaps we may hope that in the future it will acquire a grace of its own, seemingly , in which it is now deficient." They crave for that charm and that grace of a religion which Judaism possesses in abundance.

Therefore, to sum up, the attitude of Judaism to ethical culture, is decidedly a friendly one, for Judaism recognizes in it a product of its own mind, and its own plane. Judaism differs with ethical culture upon one fact only: ethical culture maintains that you may build up an ethical scheme of life without reference to God. Judaism maintains that any such scheme of ethics that you may build up will lack positiveness and the driving force and the realty, and the power and the sureness that one must have in order to lead the ethical life. And the founder of ethical culture himself has accepted the position of Judaism without endeavoring to impose his individual conception upon other members of the ethical culture society.

We need a religion, a religion of prayer and not a religion of pamphlets. We need a religion of emotions, and sentiment, and not a lecture lyceum. That cannot satisfy human life. And I have always believed that one of the great weaknesses of reformed Judaism is that it has denuded itself of content, that it has stripped itself of those essential things of religious

life, that it has endeavored consistently to delimit itself to a system of ethics, forgetting that man cannot live in the realm of the abstract at all times, that a moral idea cannot sustain him and console him in need, in sorrow, in sickness, in bereavement. These institutions which ages have built up are surrounded with so much of glorious memories and associations that breathe so much of sanctity and glory, that become so many beautiful impulses in our lives,--these things are essentials in life. And even those which the ethical culture disciples have endeavored to do away with, they have inevitably been compelled to return to them. We need a variagated many-colored, a palpitating religion, a religion that is based upon the belief that God is in His world, God is in heaven; all is well with the world; that we are working out the purposes of God, and the purposes of God will endure for ever. That is the Jewish conception.

To sum up in as few words as possible, then, the series of five lectures which I have given on Judaism and other things, I will say again what I said in the beginning of my first lecture, my object was not, and I hope that it has not proved to be, to depreciate other faiths and other religions, to exalt Judaism at the expense of other religions. My object has been to point out the characteristic differences between Judaism and other faiths, and to show why we, as Jews, must continue to live as Jews if we believe that the principles of Judaism when clearly understood are the most fundamental.

sound and wholesome for human society. I want the Jewish layman to become deeply conscious of his Judaism, to know its implications, to come to look upon his Judaism not as upon a burden that past ages have placed upon his shoulders, not as a misfortune bequeathed unto him, which he cannot shake off because of fear of public opinion or public pressure. I want you to become conscious of the fact that you people have for thousands of years carried the ark of the covenant of the Lord, containing sacred, undying truths which other religions have challenged and which other religions challenge today; and in spite of the contentions of other faiths, Judaism insists upon the basic truths.

I have endeavored to show you the differences between Judaism and Christianity; between Judaism and Mohammedanism; between Judaism and the religions of the East; between Judaism and Christian Science, between Judaism and Ethical Culture. The differences between Judaism and Christianity are these: Judaism insists upon absolute unity. Christianity--orthodox Christianity still speaks of a trinity. In whatever metaphysical sense, in whatever philosophic notion, however beautiful or allegorically or metaphorically explained, it is trinity, and Judaism does not accept it. Christianity insists upon salvation through faith. Judaism insists upon salvation through service. Christianity insists upon the innate sinfulness of human life. Judaism insists upon the innate dignity and worthwhileness of human life. These are the

basic things. They are not merely verbal controversies --hair-splitting differences; these are fundamental differentiations.

Judaism differs from Mohammedanism. Mohammedanism in a sense does not preach a God of morality. Morality is, in a sense, separated from God. Mohammedanism does not speak of God as the source of holiness. Judaism speaks of God as the source of morality and ethics, the God of holiness. Mohammedanism insists upon fate, that life is dominated by an unyielding and inexorable fate. Judaism insists upon free will and the ability to choose between right and wrong and the ability to determine your own destiny. Mohammedanism speaks of a hereafter in terms of physical and material. Judaism speaks of a hereafter only in terms of spiritual immortality.

Judaism differs from the religions of the East in this: the religions of the East look upon life as evil and human existence as one of unending suffering and pain, and upon the object and goal of life to escape from life and to lose one's self through annihilation in Nirvana,--in complete forgetfulness, even as a drop of water loses its identity in the ocean. Judaism maintains that life is not all suffering and sorrow, that there is happiness and joy, and ambitions realized and hopes fulfilled, and friendship, and the love of children to parents, the greatest happiness attainable in the world. It does not deny the reality of evil, but it says evil is

not ultimate but may be overcome by good. Again, the religions of the East, with few exceptions, recognize the caste system of society--and even any religion. Judaism is a religion of democracy and recognizes no caste, no system, no social position, no differences of races and nations. All her children are of God who is the Father of all men.

And Judaism differs from Christian Science in the fact that Christian Science denies the reality of evil and matter, and Judaism insists that as far as our lives are concerned, matter is real and evil is real; that God created matter and form, and good and evil, and that evil is in this world not as a permanent unchanging reality, but to be transformed constantly through human effort to good. Evil is here as our discipline, as our trainer, to lead higher lives, and to breathe the purer air. Christian Science inevitably would make a religion of health and of the absence of pain and suffering. Judaism makes a religion of God and of social service. Judaism is a religion for the healthy and for the sick at the same time.

Judaism differs from Ethical Culture in the fact that it maintains that there can be no reality, no ethical code, no moral life unless we believe fully that God lives and that God's purposes are working themselves out through His children, the children of men.

Now, I believe a religion such as this is worth holding, is worth living for, is worth, if necessary,

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dying for. It is worth preaching. All religions today are carrying on a propaganda to reveal their greatness and their beauty. Judaism alone, somehow, has remained silent at a time when its voice should be heard most authoritatively, and I believe it is due to the fact that the Jewish layman himself has not been sufficiently well informed and sufficiently inspired as to the innate glory and strength of his faith. Judaism has seen the passing of many religions and the birth of many. It has survived them all. In spite of our smallness of number and in spite of the many disabilities of our lives in the past and in the present, Judaism has continued to live and to be a great force in life. Out of it have come Christianity and all its denominations. And Mohammedanism, out of it has come Ethical Culture; and out of it will come a thousand and one other religions. Judaism will forever remain as the source and the mainspring of truth. In God and the truth of God. The keynote of our faith which I have sounded in every lecture must still remain until the end of time: "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one." Amen.
