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The Development of Judaism, 1919.

LECTURE BY RABBI ABBA H. SILVER, ON
"THE DEVELOPMENT OF JUDAISM", AT THE
TEMPLE, EAST 55th STREET AND CENTRAL
AVENUE, SUNDAY MORNING, MAY 4, 1919.

In this series of five lectures it is our aim to trace the development of Judaism, for we believe that Judaism is not one act of revelation but a progressive revelation through centuries, or, in other words, the unfoldment of certain great ideas in Israel. As you look over the past you may discern many cross-currents; you will find many contradictions; you may detect here and there ideas and doctrines that seem mutually exclusive, but if you look below the surface of the waters you will find those deep channels that throughout the course of Jewish history were never swerved nor turned--the silently moving waters in the depths of the spirit of the Jew.

Now, these few essential ideas may assume at different times different garbs. They may receive unequal emphasis; they may be subjected to the influences of other cultures and other theologies; they may be modified temporarily, but these few essential ideas remain, in a sense, unaltered and unchanged from very earliest times to the present. Now, in concluding my discourses last year I delivered a series of three lectures on "What is Judaism?" and those who attended those lectures

will recall that I spoke of the three essential ideas in Judaism--God, man and Israel. I discussed the content of Judaism then, but now I wish to discuss not the content but the history of Judaism; not the final expression of our faith but its progressive development through centuries. We wish to see how the germ of these great ideas came to be, how the seed which germinated in the soul of the people came to break through the sod and seek the light. We wish to see what every age and every great religious reform contributed to the sum total of Judaism, and how Judaism reacted to outside influences and outside movements of thought. In other words, I want to tell you the story of Judaism.

I want to have you see with me the humble beginnings of the great faith. You must not be discouraged because the beginnings of our faith were humble. We do not judge a man by his childhood, and yet it is sometimes necessary to understand the childhood of a man in order to understand the man. You will not judge music today and hold it of little account because the art of music began in the dim distant past, with the beating of the tom-tom by some savage in a wild dance. You will not hold it against architecture because the first architectonic of man was perhaps an ugly hovel; you will not hold it against the art of painting because the first expression of the genius of man for imagery was some wild, weird tatooing upon his body; you will not hold it against chemistry because it originated in

alchemy. In fact, the beginnings of things have historical value only, but they dare not be used to evaluate the worth of anything. To see a thing in its beginning, in its unfoldment, in its development is to watch the most wonderful thing in life--an act of creation. You do not admire the sun, the blazing sun, but you do admire a sunrise or sunset, because there is an act of creation. There is action, there is development, and that change, that shifting movement creates an emotional stimulus within you, and it is beautiful. You like to watch the daily development of your child--its lisping, its groping, its staggering into infancy, and into youth, and into manhood, because you are watching an act of creation.

And so with a religion. An historic religion passed through a period of infancy and childhood before it reached maturity. Our faith, perhaps the oldest of historical religions, passed through just such a stage. I believe it is very inspiring to study the beginnings of things and the development of things, because I see in these the promise of future development. If religion or art or science were in a state of being instead of in a state of becoming, if things were static and fixed, then the quest, the adventure, the interest, the concern would be lost. It is because things have developed in the past that they may continue to develop in the future, and that you and I may contribute in some measure to the development of that particular art, or religion, or

science in the future. So that when I speak of the beginnings of Judaism I mean actually to inspire you with the tremendous achievements of our people in rising upon these lower levels and reaching to the higher levels, and in showing you how the spirit of the genius of the Jew cut through that mass of superstition that throttled other peoples but that could not forever incarcerate the onrushing spirit, the God-seeking spirit of the Jew.

Now, I have divided the subject into five chapters, arbitrarily entirely. There are no distinct periods in Judaism; one period precedes another and follows one; they all blend. Judaism is like a mighty river winding its way through three thousand years of history, but ever and anon receiving a tributary which gives additional volume to the river, and ever and anon coming across a curious land formation which deflects it and gives it additional momentum; so that while the river is always the same it yet has certain curious and interesting bends and sweeps. It is some of these bends and sweeps in the history of Judaism that we want to study.

This morning I shall speak of the rise of this river, and like all great rivers their rise is very humble and very frequently difficult to detect because they are almost always on the top of some cloud-covered mountain, and so the rise of Judaism is difficult to detect with exactitude. What was the faith of primitive Israel? And when I speak of primitive Israel, I have in mind the

Israel before the period of the prophets, before the ninth century, before the common era. I mean the period covered by the patriarchs and by Moses, that vast period in the history of our people before they entered Canaan and during the early centuries of struggle for the conquest of Canaan into the period of the prophets. What was their faith? The faith of primitive Israel was exactly like the faith of primitive man. Religion is man's reaction to the unknown. Religion is the endeavor of man to explain all the facts of the universe, and the science of religion has established the fact that all men of a given degree of civilization will react in the same manner to these things. Now, our forefathers were nomads in the great desert of Arabia. They were wandering Semitic tribes across the vast wilderness of the desert of Arabia. The modern Bedouin, the modern Arab who moves his tent from one oasis to another, and his flocks, is exactly like his forefather three thousand years ago and in studying the life and the belief of the modern Bedouin we can almost with a certainty determine the belief and the life of his ancestor and of our ancestors three and four thousand years ago, because the East never changes, because life there never changes.

Now, to our primitive ancestor the world was full of spirits. Every object seemed to him to possess a guiding will, a personality, a directing will. Anything that moved or that was capable of moving appeared to him to possess some indwelling soul or spirit, or any

phenomenon of nature that he couldn't explain appeared to him to be the working of some invisible spirit. Now, that object may be the moon, or the sun, or the wind, or the rain, or the river, or the animal, or the plant,--any object that seemed to him for some mysterious reason to be moving, was the habitat, the dwelling place of a spirit. Now, it was his business, because he lived in this world, to establish a certain relationship with these spirits--with the earth, and with the sky, and with the rain. And so he began to win the favor of the benevolent spirits by means of sacrifice, by offering to them the things that he thought they delighted in; or he began to compel and to control the evil spirits, the malevolent spirits by means of sorcery or magic. That is how primitive man established his relationship with the world about him.

In the course of time certain spirits, because of their greater influence in the life of man assumed the position of greater importance. For example, our ancestors lived in the wilderness; their only possession, their wealth, was their herds, their flocks. Their entire concern in life was the prosperity and the increase of their flocks, and also the continuation of the tribe through offspring, through children. So that the spirit that controlled life, the spirit that could bless him or favor him with the increase of his flocks, or bless him with children was the spirit that played the greatest role in his life and the spirit that he wanted to get

nearest to. Now, our forefathers had such a deity and they called him Yahweh--the god who causes to be, the god who creates. He became for them in the course of time the great tribal god, the god that directed their life, and they placed the dwelling place of this Yahweh, this deity, on the top of some great mountain, which in the course of time came to be known as They worshiped this Yahweh, but not to the exclusion of these other spirits that they worshiped. He was the supreme but not the only one.

Now, when our forefathers during the fourteenth, thirteenth and twelfth centuries began to invade Canaan, singly or in groups, they came across a civilization that was far more advanced than theirs--the civilization of the Canaanites who dwelt in Palestine. A nomadic people cannot develop a high civilization; they wander about; they cannot build cities, they cannot build homes, they cannot build temples. And so their civilization must forever remain primitive, but the Canaanites dwelt upon their soil and they built homes, and built cities, and built highways, and built temples, and developed a religion with an elaborate ritual.

Now, the Canaanites were farmers agriculturists, so that they laid the stress, the emphasis, upon the sky deities and the earth deities and the rain deities,--the god that would prosper their produce and give them the yield of their field. When our forefathers entered Canaan and conquered the Canaanites, they were in turn

conquered by the civilization and the religion of the Canaanites. That happened not infrequently. When Rome conquered Greece politically and in a military way, Rome was conquered by Greece in a cultural way. When our forefathers settled in Canaan ^{and} they gave up their nomadic career and became agriculturists, they had to accept the religion of the agriculturists--they had to accept the religion of the Canaanites, and they did. They accepted all these gods--earth gods and sky gods and river gods and tree gods and worshiped them, but they never gave up the worship of Yahweh. And why? Because Yahweh, or Jehovah, had already become for them the symbol of the tribal unity of the tribes of Israel as against the Canaanites. When the tribes of Israel went into battle against the Canaanites, they went in the name of Yahweh. When they won it was Yahweh, the god of the wilderness that had won the battle for them. The song of Deborah is one of the most remarkable martial songs in the literature of the world. It commemorates the very great victory of the Israelites over the Canaanites in the battle of Kishon, which was perhaps one of the most decisive battles in the history of the world. Deborah says, "Lord, when thou wentest out of Seir, when thou marchedst out of the field of Edom."

So the Canaanite camp is on the outskirts of Palestine, as you go into the desert, and Yahweh comes out of the desert, out of his dwelling place in the wilderness, to fight for his people against the Canaanites.

And so while our ancestors accepted the worship of these many gods, they still retained with it all the worship of Yahweh, the god of the wilderness; and it is rather interesting to note that the tribes which settled among the mountains of Judea and continued their career as shepards remained more loyal to the religion of Yahweh and less addicted to the worship of the Canaanitish gods than did the tribes which settled farther north in the great plains of Palestine. Now, the bible, the old testament, has a great number of records and traces of this early religion of the Canaanites and this early religion of our forefathers. I have not the time this morning to discuss all these things in detail, but I want to take up a few of these superstitious practices of primitive ancestors in order that you may see what it was that the prophets fought against and what was the first stage in the great march of conquest that the spirit of Israel undertook.

There were five very popular forms of worship among the ancient Canaanites and among our forefathers. One was the tree worship, the worship of trees or gods who dwelt in trees; another was the worship of water deities, gods who dwelt in springs and rivers and fountains; a third was the worship of cave deities; a fourth was the rock deities, and the fifth was the worship of the dead, the souls and the spirits of the departed. Now, the bible knows of places like the Amon Mosh, the tree of the revealer. The bible knows of places like the tree of the

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soothesayer. Cities like Hebron and Askalon were famous because they were the center of tree worship cults. Now, whenever an object is consulted by a worshiper for the sake of eliciting information or advice, that object presumably is the dwelling place of a deity. When our forefathers consulted trees in order to gain information, that presupposed that in earlier times that tree was worshiped and the dwelling place of the god. The consultation of this object is known in the science of religion as a divination, and whenever you have divination in the old testament there you have the vestage of an old worship.

Now, how was the tree consulted? We have the story in the old testament of Jonathan endeavoring to find out a propitious moment for attacking the Philistines, and here is the way he does it: he watches for the movement of the wind in the top of the mulberry trees and studies it, and through the movement of the branches he determines the proper time for attacking the Philistines. What does that presuppose? It presupposes that the deity that dwelt in the tree answered the question of the worshiper through the movement of the branches. It presupposes tree worship. There were river deities in ancient Canaan. The old testament speaks of a "well of decision." People would come to decide a case and consult the well god or the spring god. was famous because it was the center of a great river cult, the worship of river gods. How was the river consulted? Why, very simply. A garment or an object was thrown into

the river and if the river accepted it the offerer was either innocent or guilty. The answer to his question was either yes or no, according to the acceptance or rejection of that particular object. In the course of time that science of divination of the river gods developed into this curious science of consultation by means of a cup. You do it today, those of you who still read the tea leaves in the bottom of a cup. That fact is traced back to the old science of divination by means of a cup. Water from a sacred well was poured into this cup and some oil on top of it, and then the worship would study the surface, the images reflected in that water and interpret them. That was the answer of the deity to the question of the man. That was divination by means of water. You remember that very interesting institution of the old testament to determine the guilt or innocence of a woman accused of unfaithfulness. She was made to drink of the holy waters in the sanctuary, the understanding being that the nearness of the deity would result either favorably or unfavorably to the one who partook of the water in proportion to his guilt or innocence. All these practices and infinitely more of them prove conclusively that in earliest times there were actually worship of river gods, spring gods or fountain gods in ancient Israel.

There were also rock deities. You remember when Moses asks of God, "Let me see Thy glory," that God said to him, "I will place thee in the cleft of the rock."

There was a sacred rock there originally the dwelling place of a god. How was the rock consulted? Why, very simply. They took chips of stone and marked one "yes," and the other "no" and then the two stones were placed in a box or some receptacle and the question was put--"Shall we go to fight the Philistines?" "Shall we embark upon this expedition?" The box was shaken and the stone that came out was the answer of the deity. If it was "yes" the expedition was begun; if it was not, the expedition was not begun. That seems rather simple, but that probably underlies the institution of the Urim and the Tumin in the old testament, these two mysterious stones which the Hebrew used to carry with him in order to consult the deity. Do you remember the story of Saul? The Jews had suffered a defeat. Saul is anxious to find out who is responsible for it and what does he do? How does he find it out? Why, he places the tribes of Israel on the one hand the royal family on the other and tells the priest to consult God. The priest brings forth the Urim and Tumin, these two stones, and he casts a lot, and the stone says Saul and his household. And then they divide Saul's household in two and they cast the lot again, and then again and again, until the guilt is established and Jonathan is the guilty party. Now, what is back of this sacred rock? Why, nothing else but that fact that these stones were originally stones from the sacred rock or holy rock. The deity dwelt in them and he gave his answer through these stones. The institution today of tossing up a dollar, head or tail, and similar fine

institutions date back to this divination, this practice of consulting the deity. I could bring you many other examples of the old testament, but our time is limited. There were rock deities and cave deities. The darkness and the calm of a cave, and the whispering winds that searched through it always inspired primitive man with fear and dread, and these caves became in his mind the dwelling place of gods. You remember Elijah when he flees from the king, he goes to seek God. He goes to the cave, not to a cave, but to the cave, a certain known holy place outside of Palestine, where originally a deity dwelt, but in time came to be sacred. All these places came in time to be sacred to God. How was the cave consulted? Why, very simply, the man slept in the cave during the night and the dreams that would come to him in that cave were the answers of the deity and the interpretation of those dreams would be the will of the gods.

And lastly there was the consultation or the worship of the dead, the spirits of the dead. People consult them today. There is a very classic example in the case of king Saul--king Saul and the witch of Endor. You are acquainted with it. King Saul has failed to get an answer from God. He has been defeated; he is in trouble. He tells his servants to find for him a woman, he consults the Obi. What the Obi is is rather difficult to determine. In all probability it was a seer. His servants find such a woman and Saul consults

her. He said to her, "Bring me up the spirit of Samuel," and the woman brings up the spirit of Samuel. Saul does not see the spirit of Samuel but the witch makes the spirit of Samuel talk, and the spirit tells Saul that he is doomed to defeat and annihilation and scolds Saul for disturbing his peace and bringing him up from the realm of the spirits and he departs. Now, what is back of all that? Back of all that is the ancient practice of worshipping the dead, the disembodied spirits that live in sort of a vague netherworld, who were in constant communication with the realm of the living and could be invoked or compelled by means of some magic to come back in the realm of the living.

This worship of trees and caves and rocks and rivers, and the worship of the dead, this belief in a world full of spirits, friendly or inimical,--that was the belief of our forefathers in pre-prophetic times, and that was the belief that our great prophets had to denounce and fight in order that the pure worship of one spiritual God may come to the front. How the struggle was initiated, who was responsible for it, and with what success it met, we shall take up in our next lecture when we speak of prophetic Judaism.

I want to close with this additional thought: the religion of primitive man, the religion of primitive Israel was a non-ethical religion. It had absolutely nothing to do with ethics or morality. The relation of the worshiper to the deity was the relation of a purely

ritualistic or ceremonial kind. If the god was satisfied with the sacrifices of the worshiper, with the offerings, the relation was complete and perfect. That the deity was the kind of justice, or of love, or the guardian of sacred ideals of society, that never dawned upon the minds of the primitive man. The moral life was entirely distinct and separate from the religious life. Some people do it today. They separate their moral life and their religious life. But in primitive society that was universal. Now, it was the work of the prophets, as we shall see, to identify the two and to see that God is the God of justice and the God of love, the conserver of the traditions, the sacred ideals of the people, that God is a personal deity interested not alone in the sacrifices of the people but more so and perhaps exclusively in the moral conduct, in the life of the worshiper. That was the tremendous contribution of the great prophets of Israel. We shall see next week how this great river, which fructified all the planes of human thought, beginning so humbly, in the course of time widens and receives the vast tributaries of tremendous personalities, grows in volume and in force, and comes out in the light of day a beautiful river of God, brilliant in the sunlight of a new revelation. That was the achievement of the prophets of Israel.
