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Series IV: Sermons, 1914-1963, undated.

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Prophetic Judaism, 1919.

1. Rel like all primitive men - Jahweh - Canaan - ^{shuffled} ~~apocryphal~~
1 - Polytheism -
2 - A - moral -
3 - ~~other~~ did not advance beyond - Israel had - Jesus?
- prophetic mystery.

2. Polytheism, - Elijah - herosheim - divinization - ¹¹²¹ ~~Smith says~~
moralization - ¹¹²¹ ~~poly~~ ¹¹²¹ ~~herosheim~~ - Joshua / not socialists
Retinalism - Isaiah - Jeremiah

3. Extremists -

4. Ethical Monotheism - Meads - Essene & Judaism



LECTURE BY RABBI ABBA H. SILVER ON "PROPHETIC
JUDAISM," AT THE TEMPLE, EAST 55th STREET AND
CENTRAL AVENUE, SUNDAY MORNING, MAY 11, 1919.

In our last lecture we saw the humble origin of the great faith of Israel. We studied the soil, unattractive, uninspiring, but the soil which contained the seed of future greatness. You will recall that we said the religion of primitive Israel was very much like the religion of all primitive men. The worship of primitive Israel was the worship of spirits, of deities which seemed to inhabit almost every physical object. When Israel comes out into the view of history already one deity has assumed a place of pre-eminence, and that deity is known as Jahweh or Jehovah, the creator of life and the covenanted deity of Israel. That was out of the nomadic stage of our people's history. When they entered Canaan they came into contact with a more elaborate, a more advanced religious cult, and by conquering the Canaanites they were conquered by the religion and the culture and the civilization of these conquered Canaanites. Having become an agricultural people instead of a wandering shepherd people, they adopted all the agricultural deities of the Canaanites, never, however, surrendering the great god of the desert, the peculiar Israelitish deity Jehovah. They formed something like the primitive pantheon--many gods, many goddesses, but one supreme god, who is Jehovah.

We saw also, if you recall, that the religion of the primitive Jew had very little of the ethical or the moral about it. The religion of primitive man was purely a ceremonial and a ritualistic religion. His relation with his deity was a purely formal relation. The deity demanded certain rights and certain sacrifices and the observance of certain practices and customs,--the keeping of certain festivals, the offering of the first-born and similar things. If the worshiper performed these things faithfully he was acceptable to the deity and won the favor of the deity. If he did not, he enraged his deity and subjected himself to the wrath and anger of the infuriated god. The notion that God is the source of morality, the inspiration and the goal of the ethical life, that He is the indwelling ethical impulse of man,--that had not come into the mental horizon of primitive Israel.

Now, I said that all peoples passed through these elementary stages, but few people advanced beyond them. Egypt and Babylonia, for example, sunk gradually into a veritable morass of idolatry or polytheism or priestcraft and never emerged from it. How Israel came to cut its way through all this and emerge in the light of a greater truth is simply a mystery like all phenomena of genius are a mystery. One can only describe, one cannot explain. Why the Greeks and not the Romans should carve the most beautiful marbles and sing the most beautiful songs one cannot tell, why, of all the teeming tribes of the great wilderness of Arabia, these few scattered tribes of Israel

alone should fashion a God idea which would endure forever, while the Canaanites who preceded them in Palestine, and who were also the original tribes of the desert, could not, one cannot say. Why suddenly in Israel a group of men, titanic and inexplicable, should arise and speak of vast and unfamiliar truths, men who would scorch with the fire of burning wrath and heal with the balm of soothing love, men who would carve their way through the darkness and open new and wonderful vistas of human progress and human promise, one cannot say. Standing before the phenomena of genius, whether individual or racial one can only say, one can only predicate of it--it is. That is all--it is.

Out of the vast silences of the almost endless wilderness, these few scattered tribes of Israel came somehow, bearing within their souls a latent passion and undefined and inarticulate longing for divinity and for humanity, which passion and which longing, abiding through centuries, germinated in the soul of the people, awaiting the moment of full fruition and expression, and then it came, astounding the world.

Now, this new movement, this novel thing which the genius of the Jew contributed to the history of mankind, this vivid, radical reinterpretation of life and redefinition of religion which Israel gave to the world we call prophetic Judaism. The prophets of the ninth, the eighth and the seventh centuries before the common era attacked the primitive religion of Israel at its weakest points.

The mission of the prophet was a two-fold one: first, to destroy polytheism in Israel, and, secondly, to azotize or moralize religion. Elijah was perhaps the first of the prophets, though not of the literary prophets, that is, those prophets whose writings have descended to our day, to clearly challenge the people. "If Jehovah is your God, worship me; if Baal is your god, worship him." There cannot be a plurality of sovereignty^{of divinity} in Israel. There cannot be a pantheon, a synthesis of gods in Israel, just as there did exist in Greece, in Rome, in Egypt and in Babylonia. They went a step further. There were many Israelites at the time who were ready to agree that Jehovah was the God of Palestine, the God of Israel, all-powerful and sovereign, but that other peoples who lived in other lands had their gods equally as powerful and equally as great. We have an echo of that thought which has been designated by students of comparative religion as

--one God for only one people. We have an example of that in the book of Judges. Jephthah writes a letter to the King of Ammon and says to him something like this: "Why be enemies? Let us be friends. That which connotes your god has caused thee to possess that which thou possessest, and that which Chemosh our god hath caused us to possess that we shall possess." Now, the prophet who conceived of God as the universal God, the creator of heaven and earth whose dominion is limited not to one place, not to one people, who is the God of all people and of all races, it was their ambition to impress

not correctly quoted

upon the minds of the people this thought: that the gods of the Gentiles are idols without reality, without substance--images, the creation of the hand of man. And over again and again through all the inspired words of the prophets is acted and reacted this thought; that the gods of all peoples are idols, they are nothing; they do not exist; there is no reality in them. God is the God of the Philistines and the God of the Moabites and the God of the Ammonites, and the God of the Canaanites and the God of the Greeks, and the God of the Babylonians, and the God of the Egyptians. He controls their destinies just as much as He controls the destiny of Israel. I am quoting the Prophet Isaiah. Now, it took centuries to impress indelibly upon the consciousness of the people that which to us today is a platitude; but the prophets went a step further still. The people said, "We accept Jehovah as our God, but then there is no harm in observing these practices and customs which have come down from the past." These practices of divination of which I spoke last week. "They are helpful; we can divine the future by means of casting rods, or through water divination, or through consulting the spirits of the dead. Why not?" The prophets looked upon these practices as the practices of the heathen. They knew that these practices presupposed the worship of many demons, or gods, or deities, and they set about to uproot it completely. Hosea said, "My people consult their wooden blocks and seek the oracle from their staff"--referring to the practice of divining

by means of rods and branches of trees and wooden staffs. The Prophet Isaiah said unto the people, "When they say unto you consult the ghosts and the familiar spirits that chirp and that mutter, say unto them, 'Shall not a people consult its God? For the sake of the living shall we consult the dead?'" And the Prophet Micah in anger said, "The time will come when God will destroy all the witchcraft from among you and uproot all the lying soothsayers." The prophets were opposed to divination not only because they presupposed polytheism but also because they presupposed this fact: that a man can divine the future by means of artificial, mechanical means. The prophet who conceived of God as spirit knew that the future was the hidden book to the eyes of the children of man, that divination is a lie, that only in the moral life can man seek guidance from God by endeavoring to live a perfect moral life, and through meditation and self-examination. And so the prophets set about to deny this in the face of the religion which recognized the validity of the dream as a means of revelation. You will recall in some of the stories of the bible which are composed of the dim, distant past, Jacob sees God as in a dream; God appears to Solomon in a vision at night. It was the almost universal belief of the day that the dream was the channel through which God revealed Himself to man.

Now, the prophets knew that man received the word of God not in a dream and not in any abnormal state, but when his mind was most active and his soul most alert, when all

the spiritual energies of his body were seeking and thirsting for God. And so Jeremiah says, "Let him who has a dream tell his dream; but let him who hath received the word of God tell the word of God. What hath chaff to do with the grain? The dream is chaff." True prophesy, true revelation, true inspiration depends upon no mechanical artifices and upon no subconscious or abnormal state of mind and soul. That led the prophets ultimately to redefine the meaning of the word "prophet." What is a prophet? The Hebrew word nabhi which means "prophet" originally meant one who stammered and muttered, referring undoubtedly to the practice prevalent in those days and still today in some of the eastern countries, especially among the fakirs and dervishes of India, who whipped themselves into a fury by some artificial means such as a wild dance or by drinking the blood of sacrificial animals, and then in that state of frenzy or possession to mutter words, inexplicable to the ordinary bystander, but interpreted and explained by the priests who knew the secret of it all. The original nabhi, then, was a possessed dervish or soothesayer. You remember the story of King Saul. Saul meets a group of such prophets and he is infected with that madness, and stripping himself he hurls himself upon the ground and for the livelong day mutters and chirps and cries, and people said, "Is Saul also among the prophets?" That was the original prophet. But the prophet as defined by the group of literary men had nothing in common with them. The

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prophet was not a soothesayer at all. He did not
prophecy of the future at all; he was the soothesayer of
the people; he was the spokesman of God; he was the incor-
porate conscience, the articulate soul, the embodied idea
of the people, and his function was not to foretell the future,
to help people in their daily occupations, to resolve them
of their doubts and dreads, but his function was, as is
expressed in the words of the prophet, "To tell Jacob
his sins and Israel's transgressions." He was the voice of
the people calling, calling to justice, to righteousness,
to faith in one God.

That was the first great contribution of Israel to
religion--a denial of the existence of many gods, a
denial of all artificial means of evoking the will of the
deity and the establishment of the great truth for all
time, that man can come in contact with God only through
his moral consciousness, through his soul alone. And the
second great contribution of the prophets was, as I said,
to ~~ethicize~~ ^{ethicize} or moralize religion. For all His ways are
just, a God of faithfulness and without iniquity. Just and
right is He. That is the definition of the deity given
by the prophets. Just and right; God is a God of justice
and righteousness, the source, the fountain-head of moral
conduct among the children of man. The relations of man
are the direct concern of the deity--"justice belongs to
God." And when the prophet urges upon the people to be
just, the reason is always, "For I am the Lord." And
when the prophet urges upon the people that supreme and most

perfect virtue--"I love to be holy"--be holy why? "For I, the Lord, your God, am holy." God is the pattern, the mold, the inspiration of the ethical life. That was the supreme contribution of the prophets of Israel. God is more especially the provider, the protector, the defender of all the unfortunate--the blind, the lame, the deaf, the orphan, the widow, the fatherless, the poor--a God of love. "Thou shalt not hate thy brother in thy heart for I am the Lord." "Love thy neighbor as thyself for I am the Lord." Because of that the prophets became the greatest champion of social justice in the history of humanity. With what bitter invectives they lashed every evidence and manifestation of injustice in Israel! How ruthless they were, how uncompromising in their attitude, how awful in their denunciation! They knew just as Israel of a much later date expressed it, that the messiah would long ago have come were it not for the fact that his hands and feet were shackled with chains of the cult. They knew the corruption which wealth, illy gotten brings to the soul of man. They denounced him because of their intense spiritual conception of God. They also were forced to denounce those institutions and practices which the people observed in those days, and which in themselves perhaps were not harmful, but because they placed the center of the religious life in the institution and the ceremony and the observance and not in the moral life, the prophet was called upon to denounce them. You know that one of the great failings of human life is that we readily take the

form for the content, the body for the soul, the organization for the spirit which evoked it. Man has a tendency to become institutionalized, to become over-organized, so that the soul is swathed in the artificialities and the trappings, the dressings and forms and ceremonies until it stifles. The prophets knew it and so they said unto the people, "That is not what God desires of you. Sacrifices? Did your forefathers sacrifice forty years in the wilderness? No. I am weary of your sacrifices; it is an abomination,--your holidays and ceremonies and your holy , because your hands are full of blood. You cannot atone for your sins by being formally pious. Wash your hands, clean your souls, cease to do evil, learn to do well." They expressed ever and anon a spirit, a soul, not the body and the ceremony. That today is a very pertinent fact, a truth which must not be forgotten. Today likewise men think that they may appease the deity and atone for past sins by bringing sacrifices. Today the sacrifices may not be in the nature of a lamb or a sheep. It takes another form--endowment of educational institutions, building of hospitals or similar deeds, but when a man comes to regard his contributions to these things as sacrifices to win the favor of the deity or of society, they are abominations. "Thus saith the Lord." What was the cry of the prophet throughout the ages? "Justice shalt thou receive." And whenever a man today struggles against the ills of life, the injustice and the cruel visitations of society, his voice is an

echo of the ancient voice of Israel crying, "The of all times, justice, justice shalt thou pursue." Not flee from it, but pursue it. The prophets were not diplomats, the prophets were not socialists, the prophets were not political economists, the prophets had no theories, economic, or political, or social, they had one theory only, and that one theory was God, and that is theory enough for any man. They sought justice in life, to regulate all relations of men and peoples with the principle of justice. +

If I were to sum up the work of the prophets, it is simply this: ethical and monotheism. When the Prophet Micah says, "Thou hast been told, oh man, what is God and what the Lord doth require of thee, but to do justice and love mercy and walk humbly with thy God," he is giving an ethical and monotheistic conception of Judaism. To do justice and love mercy--that is the syncretism of religious life. Without it your religious practices and observances are so much clap-trap or foolery--meaningless. To do justice and to love mercy, and then to walk humbly with thy God, the one God of the universe. To be sure, the prophets were extremists. Every prophet is an extremist, that is why he is a prophet. To be sure, they are idealists and absolutists, else they would not have been prophets. You know we are tempted, especially in this practical age of ours, to look down with a certain amount of contempt upon the idealist and the extremist. He is impractical. Why, he lives in a world of abstraction.

The world could not get along without these dreamers of dreams, these visionaries, these extremists. After them must come the practical moralists--the sage, the wise men, the minister, the priest, the rabbi; he must endeavor to incorporate these ideals and to give them a local habitation and a name. After the prophet must come the executive of society, the man who shows us how to do it; society would never get along without these inexplicable, these tremendous personalities who seem to come from nowhere in some mysterious, unknown way, and speak with lips touched the by burning coal of inspiration, uttering words that blend themselves into the soul of humanity and remain there as a consecration and as an inspiration.

Prophetic Judaism--that is the essence of Judaism. We shall see in our next lecture how the sages and the wise men and the rabbis endeavored to make these ideals efficient and practical, how they set about to safeguard them by establishing a wonderful discipline of conduct. We shall see how the spirit of the Jew, once having become conscious in the soul, is never, from that day on, completely forgotten. It passes many mutations and modifications; there are many cross currents, but the deep channels flow on swiftly, smoothly, freely--the deep channels of ethics and of monotheism. "Thou hast been told, oh man, what is God, for the Lord doth require of thee, but to do justly, to love mercy and to walk humbly with thy God."