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What Does Judaism Think of Spiritualism?, 1920.

LECTURE BY RABBI ABBA H. SIEVER, ON "WHAT DOES
JUDAISM THINK OF SPIRITUALISM," AT THE TEMPLE,
EAST 55th STREET AND CENTRAL AVENUE, SUNDAY
MORNING, JANUARY 4, 1920.

The pathetic desire to penetrate the veil that enshrouds death and to communicate with those whom we have loved and lost has never been so wide-spread as in recent years. The war has separated so many loving hearts, has cut low so many young lives, has brought bereavement and sorrow into so many hearts that it would be unnatural if the longing hearts and yearning souls of men and women did not try to reach out through the engulfing mystery of death and try to find solace and comfort in the knowledge where faith alone cannot suffice, that they who die live and are with them. And so hundreds and thousands of men and women have turned to spiritualism, hoping to find therein that consolation which life and life's friends and activities could not give them. Spiritualism is the belief in the survival of conscious personality after death in a spirit world, and the ability to communicate with that personality through some mediumship.

Now, spiritualism is not a new faith or a new science. It was known and practiced extensively among the ancient Greeks and Romans and Persians. Our ancestors in

Palestine took that practice over from the Persians. The prophets of Israel invariably and without exception in no mistakable terms condemned the practice. What is now known as spiritualism was, in ancient days, necromancy, that is, divination by means of consulting the dead. (1)

In the Book of Leviticus, for example, we read, "Do not turn to the oboth and to the yiddonim --to those who consult by means of a skull, and to those who consult the neighing spirits. And do not seek to render yourselves unclean by that. In Deuteronomy we read, "Do not tolerate him who consults the oboth and the yiddonim, and he who consults the dead, for he who does these things is an abomination in the sight of the Lord."

The Prophet Isaiah more than any other prophet denounces these practices, which must have been very prevalent in Israel three thousand years ago. "And when they say unto you," says Isaiah, "consult the dead and the

yiddonim, who gibber and mutter, say unto them, 'Shall not a people consult its own God? Shall we consult the dead in behalf of the living?'"

The classic example of necromancy or spiritualism in the bible is that of the witch of Endor, familiar to all of you. King Saul has tried to divine the future to discover whether he would be successful on the following day in his battle with the Phillistines. He tried the three legitimate means of consulting God--the dream, the urim and tumin, that is, the sacred oracle and the prophets, but he has failed to receive word from all these three agencies.

So that he turns in despair, and as a last resort to a ba-alath ob, an old woman who consults the dead. He had previously ordered the extermination of all those who practiced these things, but his servants find a witch somewhere in hiding and bring Saul to see her. Saul asks of the witch to bring up the spirit of Samuel, the Prophet, and the witch brings up the spirit of Samuel. Saul does not see the apparition but the witch does and describes Samuel to Saul, and Saul hears the voice of Samuel speaking unto him, "Because thou didst disturb my peace, because thou hast forsaken thy God, therefore on the morrow calamity will overtake thee." Saul, frightened, weakened through the long fast, falls into a faint and the vision disappears.

The rabbis of the Talmud speak of those who consult the dead as of those who dig up the dead, and decry even with imprecations the practice. Now, the reason why Israel condemned spiritualism in ancient days is the reason why some of us would be tempted to condemn it in the present day. Spiritualism in the olden days was a religion. People consulted the dead because the dead were looked upon as gods, as deities who knew the future. The dead were used as means of divination, and ancient Israel, being determined to emphasize the unity of God, the holiness and the purity of God, and to exterminate all idolatry and all heathenish customs and rites, looked down with disfavour upon a practice which implied to the mind of him who practiced it that the dead were deities and gods.

In other words, it is because people made of necromancy a religion that ancient Judaism denounced it.

Now, people today are tempted to commit the same mistake just because certain phenomena cannot be explained by our physical laws, just because certain super-normal facts have not yet been completely interpreted. They therefore make a religion of spiritualism. Now, spiritualism is a subject for the scientific laboratory and not for the church. Spiritualism is a matter for scientific investigation and not for prayer meetings. Men and women today, in their eagerness, for new fads and fancies in religion, take half welded truths which science is endeavoring to investigate, to clarify, to establish, and make of these a creed and a dogma, thereby interfering with the scientific investigation of that truth.

So that spiritualism, being looked upon as a religion, makes of religion not a communion with God but a communion with some gibbering spirits; not a communion with the great soul of humanity, but a communion with some unknown intelligences that speak to us unintelligently through raps and knocks and luminous illusions. We commit the same folly when we take the truth or the half truth of mental suggestion as a means of healing certain nervous disturbances of the human system and make of that a religion. So that God becomes a sublimated medicine man, and religion becomes completely concerned in oneself for oneself.

It is a grave mistake. Religion transcends all

these things. Religion is more than these things. Religion is more than the consultation of certain spirits, even if that were true and possible. For after all, spiritualism, psychic order, is not yet the spiritual order. After all, they, too, are external; after all, they, too, are part of nature, and religion is more than that.

But Judaism does not oppose the scientific investigation of the phenomena of spiritualism. Judaism does not oppose any scientific investigation. Judaism is not dogmatic, like some scientists are, on the subject of super-normal phenomena. Judaism knows that the physical laws do not explain everything. Judaism knows that the materialistic interpretation of the universe is not sufficient to explain a great number of phenomena. And Judaism says because a fact or a phenomenon is inexplicable today, therefore that fact and that phenomenon must be denied. Judaism knows that that vast accumulation of evidence on the part of scientists of note and reputation and integrity, who have staked their scientific reputation upon the facts which they narrate, cannot be slightly turned aside by a word or a jest or a dogma. We recognize that that mass of information on psychic phenomena, collected by such a reputable organization as that of the Society of Psycho Research in England, of the evidences and testimonies of men like William James and Ambrosia, and Henry Benson, and Oliver Lodge, and Sir William Crookes, and Sir William Barrett, and a host of other scientists

who approach the subject in a spirit of absolute incredulity, with the sole desire of discrediting all these reported phenomena and revealing the fraud or the trickery or the hallucinations back of them all.--we cannot take their evidence and their testimony and completely shut out eyes to these facts and say there is nothing in them.

Judaism knows that we are just beginning to become conscious of the faculties of the human mind. We know that we cannot explain mind by matter; we know that the brain is not yet thought; and we know that consciousness--thinking, willing--cannot be explained by an action or interaction of molecules. We know, for example, that mind or thought, which is an immaterial substance, can be projected through an immaterial medium and made effective on another mind vast distances removed. We know that telepathy is a fact. We know, for example, and we speak very frequently of it, of the existence of an imperceptible and imponderable substance which we call ether. Now, no one has ever seen or tasted or touched ether, and yet without ether the world is unintelligible to the scientists. It is a substance, material, and not immaterial, that is between the stars and between each molecule, that is real even if unseen.

We know, for example, that our five senses cannot be our only sources of information; that our five senses must often give us false information. Most of our experiences come from seeing things, and yet sight is the most deceptive sense of all. What we see is really not the things in

themselves. When we say we see a thing all that we get are certain impressions conveyed to us by waves and undulations of ether,--Color, weight, substance. The thing itself remains unknown to us.

We know that there are sounds we cannot hear because the sound waves are too fast or too slow for our ear to catch. We know that we cannot see too great and powerful a light. We know that there are certain things we cannot taste because they are too pungent for our taste. We know that our sense of smell is very poorly developed in us. In other words, were man compelled to rely upon his five senses for all the information and all truth and knowledge, man would be really, completely imprisoned in a world of ignorance.

Judaism, then, says that these phenomena that come to us by levitation, or bodies rising in the air by no physical impulse,--these evidences that we know of are apparitions, of men and women receiving messages of the death of some dear one at the time of that dear one's death, or shortly thereafter; These phenomena of automatic or direct writings, of sounds heard when there was no physical agency to produce the sound, of the immunity of the medium, say to fire, and a thousand and one other facts studied, observed, investigated by men who have a lifelong training in scientific investigation,--these things Judaism says may lead to the establishment of new scientific laws as yet unknown to us.

But Judaism knows that these phenomena are as yet not completely established. Judaism knows that a great deal of work must yet be done in sifting and selecting all that has been accumulated. Much of it may be due to hallucination; much of it may be due to fraud; much of it may be simply due to what is known in psychology as the exoneural action. That is to say, the vital energy of man may project itself into space just as electricity may project itself into space through the wireless and embody itself in some physical manifestation and move objects just as a magnet may move objects within the magnetic space of it. (9)

That spiritualism implies the existence of disembodied spirits of intelligence, that spiritualism implies the survival of conscious personality after death is not yet fully established, in fact, is as yet very little established. Judaism has an open mind upon the entire subject. It realized that we have as yet learned little from the other world, if that other world exists; that all the communications which we have received and all the seances in the last one hundred years have revealed to us no new truths, no new inventions, no great discovery, nothing that we did not already know. What we did receive from the other world were broken bits of platitudes, of ordinary things that any man or any child may know. To assume from these phenomena that there is a world of spirits that know more, that know everything, that live (11) (12)

happily, is to ^{a grand jump} jump quickly to unjustified conclusions.

And Judaism maintains, too, and this is the point that I would emphasize, that all this subject of spiritualism should and ought to be left to the professional scientist and investigator. It should not become a morbid passion among the laymen, because it, after all, robs death of its dignity. Judaism says to men and women, "Look upon death with dignity, as a great adventure. Do not look upon it with the inquisitiveness of a prying child. Let the dear departed ones speak to you athwart the chasm in the tender moments of memory. Let the secret chamber of your soul, to which alone you have the key, be hung with the golden framed pictures of treasured recollections, of simple words of beauty and precious acts of kindness, of some gestures of grace and charm that you remember, of those moments of exquisite happiness when one look was heaven, and let that secret chamber of your soul forever remain sanctuary.

Is it really, friends, more comforting to know that a beloved one lives through some broken bits of pathetic intimations that you may receive by knocks and raps in a darkened room, than to believe in supreme faith that your loved one lives because a good God lives? Is it more noble and inspiring to know through some information that you have received in a half-conscious or half unconscious state, than to go through life with an undying faith that your dear one is not dead, that it is well with him, for he is with God? I sometimes think that it is the

very mystery of death that lends to it a certain charm and a certain nobility. I sometimes think that it is the uncertainty of life and of death, the things that we do not know, that give to life a grandeur and a sublimity.

Death will always be in some measure sad, even if it is only a passing on. We shed tears when a loved one leaves for a distant land, and even when we receive frequently letters and communications from him we yet miss him and we are frequently sad. And those who have passed on from this world, even if they would send us communications, that still would not rob our life completely of its sadness. And yet our faith has always taught us that death must not be regarded as a calamity, that death must not be looked upon as a grim tragedy, that we must not ever look upon him who died as if he were lost, and upon us who miss him as though we were bereft. For he is not lost; he lives with God. And we are not bereft, for he is with us constantly, at our side, in our souls in those sweet memories that nothing can dissipate. And somehow we feel not bereft, for we hope that when our life's pilgrimage is over we may ~~be~~^{not meet} at the end of the road.

Judaism watches spiritualism as a newly developed science. It may establish what we have maintained for centuries--that life can exist without matter, that life can exist without protoplasm, that spirit is not dependent upon matter, that matter is, after all but the vehicle, the channel, the embodiment of something greater, more

permanent and dominating than matter.

The science of the super-normal man may cause the entire philosophy of materialism, which was developed to a perfection in Germany in the last two generations, to collapse. And the philosophy of idealism, which your fathers and mine have treasured in the sanctuary of their souls for thousands of years, that the soul of man is the spirit of God, that God is spirit and man is made in the image of God, will ultimately emerge triumphant and scientifically vindicated. (15)

We, you and I, will refrain, out of respect to the memory of the departed, from foolishly and stupidly dissipating our energies, the energies which we ought to devote to the fine and noble concerns of life, by trying to communicate with them through some medium who is, as a rule, a charlatan and a fakir. We shall communicate with our dear ones constantly in memory in continuing their life's traditions, in living for and by the ideals which they set for themselves, in keeping their names sweet as honey upon the lips of our fellow men. That is a far more sublime type of spiritual communication of the soul communion. And we shall continue to believe, even as our forefathers believed of yore, that the soul of man is immortal, the energy of life and of the spirit can never be destroyed, that it may be transmuted and it may be changed and it may soar into other realms, yet it will remain a real and enduring presence. (16) (17) (18)

We shall believe in immortality because we need it. Our life needs it; our ethics need it; our moral code needs it. Life and ideals and morals would be a mockery if death were the omega, the finality, the dreadful end of all our struggles and all our aspirations. Then God would be, as Heine says, the great Aristophanes⁹ of heaven, sitting above and laughing at our petty struggles and our future strivings, that must at last be brought low to the reeking gloom of the grave.

God is not a mocking, whimsical tyrant. God is a beneficent Father and we are His children, and our hopes and our ambitions and our aspirations, the things we try to be but cannot be, the things we reach for but cannot grasp, the things which thrill our soul but drag through the bondage of circumstances, of environment, of poverty, of misery, of bereavement and do the things which ~~our~~ poor, mortal powers in themselves cannot accomplish,--all these things will see realization and accomplishment and perfection in God; that the Master Architect of the universe Who described the arc of human imperfection will also complete the circle of human perfection; that we are but in a vast life continuity; that we come from infinity and go to infinity; that we are sparks of eternal fire, light of an undying sun. That is the immortality that comforts and sustains and inspires man.
