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Isaac Luria - The Mystic, 1921.

LECTURE BY RABBI ABBA H. SILVER
ON "ISAAC LURIA--THE MYSTIC," AT
THE TEMPLE, SUNDAY MORNING, JANUARY
23, 1921, CLEVELAND, OHIO.

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Someone has truly said that religion without mysticism is a rose without its fragrance. In a sense every religion that posits a personal God, indwelling among men, is a religion of mysticism; but the term "mysticism" has come to have a specific continuation. One may arrive at a knowledge of God by way of the mind through intellectual speculation; that is rational religion. But one may arrive at a realization of God through intense personal experience; that is a mystic religion.

Some believe that one cannot attain to a knowledge of God by man's reason or logic; that one can only realize God in those rather intense moments of spiritual ecstasy, when it seems as though the veil that separates man from the ultimate reality is rent for the moment and he is able to catch a glimpse of the great Eternal Light in the distance. That is the religion of the mystic.

One of the great Jewish mystics--Israel the founder of the sect of in the Eighteenth Century, described it in this wise: "A great king once built a palace and in the midst of the palace he established

his throne, and he invited his subjects to come and see him, and they came from all parts of the land to see the great king; and many found at the entrance to this palace gold and silver, and they were satisfied; and taking the gold and silver they returned home. And many of them ventured into the palace, but somehow seemed to become lost in the winding corridors and the mazes and the labyrinthian ways of this palace; they could not reach the king. Then a voice announced: 'Loyal subjects of the king, these mazes, these corridors, are illusions of your own mind; push forward through them and you will reach the king.' Those who had faith and belief moved forward through the vast, towering pillars and posts, and the corridors and by-ways, and they vanished as if by magic, and they reached the throne of glory where the great king sat."

Israel desired to illustrate by means of this parable the fact that the human mind may lead one to circuitous routes, to blind alleys, into doubts and perplexities, away from the King of the Universe ; that the spirit of man, in intense faith and in ecstasy may, in one glorious moment, reach the King and know Him. That is mysticism.

Religion may be purely formal, abstract, dogmatic, a matter of beliefs and rites and ceremonies and observances, or it may be a religion that is intimate and vivid and real and emotional--a religion in which the ceremonies

and observances themselves become agencies for a mystic union with God--avenues for approaching Divinity. That is mysticism.

It is not a religion of creed, nor even a religion of deed; it is a religion of quest--the eternal pilgrimage of the human soul towards God.

Religion may be based upon an act of revelation--like the revelation of Mount Sinai. We believe because it was so revealed at Mount Sinai; it may be based upon the authority of a book--the Bible. We believe because the Bible says so. It may be based upon the words of a prophet or of a great teacher. That is historic religion.

But religion may also be based not on any dogma but on one's personal ^{comm-}union with God--one's personal experiences, and the authority, the conviction arising from these experiences. That is mysticism.

A great Christian mystic of the Fourteenth Century--Thomas á Kempis, in his great book, "The Imitation of Christ," says this concerning the authority of the mystic: "The children of Israel in times past said unto Moses, 'Speak thou unto us and we will hear. Let not the Lord speak unto us lest we die' Not so, Lord, not so, I beseech Thee, but rather with the prophet Samuel, I humbly and earnestly entreat: Speak, Lord, for Thy servant heareth.

Let not Moses speak unto me, nor any of the prophets, but rather do Thou speak, oh Lord God, inspirer and

enlightener of all the prophets; for Thou alone without them canst perfectly instruct me; but they cannot prophet me anything. They indeed may sound forth words but they cannot give the spirit. Most beautifully do they speak; but if Thou be silent they inflame not the heart. They teach the letter; but Thou openest the sense. They bring forth mysteries but Thou unlockest the meaning of concealed things. They declare Thy commandments; but Thou helpest us to fulfill them. They point out the way, but Thou givest strength to walk in it. What they can do is only without, but Thou instructest and enlightenest the heart."

That is mysticism through and through; a desire to receive Divinity not through any mediation of teacher or prophet or book or act of revelation, but intense direct, immediate experience. In other words, mysticism is the esthetic contemplation of God and His world. It is the passionate outreaching of the human soul for ultimate reality; it is deep calling unto deep; it is the miniature world (man) seeking to find itself in the great world, which is God.

I say it is deep calling unto deep because it is this calling, this yearning of the soul, this longing for contact and union, this love for what the Jewish mystic called --the calling unto God. That is the chief and highest expression of mysticism, and that gives to mysticism its principal characteristics of fervor,

enthusiasm and passion.

You will soon realize that the God of the mystic is not the God of Maimonides at all; he is not an intellectual abstraction; it is not pure mind thinking himself, removed, distant, transcendent. The God of the mystic is imminent, indwelling among men, pervading the whole of the universe. Nature half reveals and half conceals God, but God is there, essentially there, of necessity there.

The same Jewish mystic that I quoted a moment ago-- illustrates this idea in this wise: he said an artist may take silver and fashion it into a beautiful silver vessel, and after he has fashioned it he may leave it and the vessel will exist all by itself; it needs no longer the artist since it is completed. But the world being, as it were, made out of nothing, or rather out of everything--out of God himself, the artist, the Creator, (God) cannot leave his world or the world will sink back into complete nothingness. He is essential; the Creator is essential to His creation; he is one with it and must forever remain in it.

That is real mysticism at its highest expression. Therefore all nature, holding God, as it were, speaks of God. Everything is an intimation of Divinity; the visible things speak of the invisible things; the seen things point to unseen things.

Wordsworth, the great English poet and mystic,

defines mysticism in this way: he said, "It is like a little child, a curious lad, holding to his ear a smooth-lipped shell that he picked up on the sea shore, and as he listens his face brightens up, for he seems to hear murmurings within the shell--murmurings of the far distant sea whence the shell came." Even so, says Wordsworth, is man and the universe. The universe, held up to the listening ear of man, conveys to him murmurings of distant things not grasped by his senses or even by his mind. The visible things of life point to invisible realities, and the seen things of life point to vast unseen things, because God is in the world, saturating the world, as it were; every bit of reality is a bit of Divinity, and in everything one can see God.

William Blake, the great English mystic, has this beautiful refrain:

"To see a world in a grain of sand,
And a heaven in a wild flower,
Hold infinity in the palm of your hand,
And eternity in an hour."

One of the latest of these mystics in England--
Alfred Noyes--asked this question:

"What does it take to make a rose, mother mine?
The God that died to make it knows;
It takes the world's eternal wars,
It takes the moon and all the stars;
It takes the might of heaven and hell,

And the everlasting love as well,
Little child of mine,
To make a rose; to make a rose."

That is mysticism; that is the soul of reality.
Now, you might grasp it and you might not, but to the mystic it is so real, it is so true, that he calls it the living fire; it is a new revelation to him. If you haven't it, you haven't it; it is darkness for you; it is mystery. But to the mystic it is a vast illumination, a light, a burning fire.

Now, in a general way, then, these things are true of all mysticism. First, it is a quest for communion with God; secondly, it is a passionate contemplation of the world; thirdly, it is an attempt to solve the great mysteries of life--as the Rabbis put it: What is above and what is below; what is before and what is behind; and, fourth, the eternal problems or riddles of the universe. I say that mysticism is an attempt to solve these riddles by means other than the mind, by the promptings of the heart--by man's imagination, by intuition, by vision, not by intellect.

That is true of Jewish mysticism; that is true of Christian mysticism; that is true of Mahammedan and Buddhist mysticism. Of course that is the soul of it, but the raiments, the garments, which envelope mysticism to light it up are not always as beautiful, as gainly, as attractive as the soul of it. Don't you see how an idea

such as this can lend itself to complete dejection? A mysticism that discountenances logic and reason and the intellect soon becomes obscure and chaotic, almost anarchic, in its composition before very long; mysticism becomes theosophy in its lowest terms; it becomes crude before very long; it becomes a system of shams, incantations, dreams, interpretations, transmigrations of the soul before very long; it becomes a matter of the mystery of numbers and their combinations before very long; it becomes a jangle of the perverted imagination of man unencumbered by reason or logic, a riot of crude, primitive things.

But in spite of that we must not lose sight of the soul of mysticism, of this obesity, this bigness of crude things that has surrounded it from time to time.

Jewish mysticism, my friends, dates back to the Old Testament. To be sure, it is not a science there, or a full system of theosophy, but it is there. I venture to say that the Psalms are mysticism in its highest and purest expression--the quest for communion with God. "As pants the hart for brooks of water, so my soul yearns for God." That is the quest; that is the eternal pilgrimage of the human soul; it is a passionate contemplation of the world.

"The Heavens declare thy glory, and the firmament telleth of thy handiwork." The word of the Psalms is full of God; but the Psalmist never attempts to answer questions--What is above and what is below, what is before and what is behind--either in the philosophic way or

the mystic way. He knows that God lives. "If I ascend unto Heaven, thou art there; if I ascend unto the nethermost parts of the earth, thou art there; if I take the wings of the morning and fly to the extreme ends of the earth, thou art there." That is mysticism at its best.

But in the Bible you will also find angels and spirits, and the holy chariot and holy beasts--a whole world lower than God and higher than man. They are not grouped, they are not classified, and the function of these angels is not always established, but it is there. The first chapter of the Book of Ezekiel is perhaps the nearest approach to a theosophy that we have in the Bible, and because of that the first chapter of Ezekiel, as well as the Book of Daniel, which has intimations of the Messiah, and all the references from angels and spirits, these things became the chief material for Jewish mystics in the Middle Ages.

In rabbinic literature and in the Apocrypha, those books that were not taken into the canon of the Bible, this science of mysticism has become We have references to men who are taken up to Heaven and are inducted into the mysterious things of the world. We have references in the Talmud to the mystic value of numbers and the composition of letters; we have the science of angelology--of the angels developed to perfection; every angel has a special function in the economy of nature. In the Talmud we also have the person of the Holy Ghost, as

well as the Voice--"the daughter Voice that speaks for God." We have the word, the logos of the Greeks, and of the New Testament, which seems to be the messenger of God by means of whom the world was created.

In other words, the science of mysticism is developed still farther by the Rabbis, so that they were not people against the study of it. The Rabbis said one should study philosophy only with one other man; two may study philosophy, but one only may study mysticism. They were afraid of the effects of mysticism upon the uninitiated.

But it was not until toward the end of the Tenth Century that the science begins to define itself clearly, and it was not until the Fourteenth Century that the great text book of the Jewish mystic--the Zohar--appeared, and it was not until the Sixteenth Century that the great Jewish mystics, like Isaac Luria, Moses Cordovaro, Joseph Caro and Hayyim Vital lived in Safed in Palestine.

In a way Jewish mysticism kept pace with Christian mysticism. It was in the Twelfth Century that Christian mysticism found its originator in Bernard..... and the great Christian mystics, Saint Bonifacio and..... lived in the Thirteenth and Fourteenth centuries.

Now this science of mysticism came to be known in the Middle Ages as Cabala; this science which meant a gaining of knowledge of spiritual things through methods

other than the mind came to be known as Cabala; information handed down traditionally to a selected group of people, to the initiated; esoteric information, secret information, handed down traditionally--that is what Cabala means.

The first book of Cabala is what is known as the Book of Creation--"Sefer Ma'yan ha-Hokmah"--written perhaps in the Ninth Century. Its author is unknown, and legend has traced it back to B....., even to Abraham. It is a book based largely on philosophy to a group of men who believed in the mystic value and potency of letters and numbers, and it is principally a discussion of the value and potency of numbers and their combinations.

The great text book of Cabala, however, is the Zohar. Zohar means "brightness." It is based on a sentence in Daniel--that the righteous shall shine as the brightness of the Heavens. It was written in 1390 or thereabouts by Moses..... He claimed that he found this book in a cave, and that the author of it was Simeon ben, a great rabbi of the Seventh Century. It is written in Aramac, and it is in the form of a commentary, a cabalistic commentary, on the five books of Moses.

The name Zohar (brightness) is significant. I spoke before on the revelation coming to the mystic in the form of a great illumination. The mystics are very fond of the word "light" and kindred words--brilliancy, lightness, illumination. Already in the Bible you have mention of

God--"And God is my light." Light was to them the purest immaterial substance, and the one thing that pervaded all reality; so that they expressed their opinion of the highest spiritual reality as that of light.

Now, Cabala flourished as it never did before in the Sixteenth Century, and in no place as much as in Safed. Safed is a beautiful city in Galilee. I had the opportunity two years ago to visit Safed; it is on the top of Mount Canaan overlooking the sea of Galilee, in the mountainous parts of the country. They still point out to visitors in Safed the synagogue of Isaac Luria and Joseph Caro.

The reason why mysticism gained such a hold in the Sixteenth Century may be attributed first to the intense suffering and the persecution of the people. You will remember that the Jews were exiled from Spain at the end of the Fifteenth Century, in 1492; they were exiled from Portugal four years later, and the Sixteenth Century is one of the most bitter suffering and the greatest darkness of the Middle Ages; and when people suffer physically, when people are oppressed, they begin to yearn for a reality other than that which surrounds them; they begin to seek in a faith that which life and fate have denied unto them. And the Jews of the Sixteenth Century began to live in a world of their own imagination, in a world of perfect peace and perfect communion with God, when the world around them was one of hate and hostility and persecution.

And the Jews in the Sixteenth Century began to

long ever so much for the coming of the Messiah--the Messiah that was to take them out of the and bring them back to Palestine; and these speculations about the coming of the Messiah--when he is to come, how he is to come, how can we prepare ourselves for his coming--and this desire to realize God in the supreme happiness, which is God, because life was so ugly and cruel and hard upon them, stimulated mysticism among the Jews in the Sixteenth Century.

Isaac Luria, of whom I am to speak this morning, is the type of a whole school of mystics that lived in Safed in that century. I chose him not because we know more of him or because his works are better known, but because the legend of the people has exalted him above all the other cabalists who lived in his day. He was born in 1534 in Jerusalem of a German family. He was a wonder child. At the age of eight he had familiarized himself completely with rabbinic law. His father having died, his mother took him to Cairo in Egypt where a brother lived. The brother recognized the exceptional talents of the boy, Isaac Luria, and gave him the best of instruction.

At fifteen, so says history or legend, Isaac Luria began to study mysticism, and for eight years he devoted himself to the study and the perusal of the Zohar--this great text book. In six years he received a revelation which told him that he can never attain to the real depths of Cabala until he would separate himself from

his family and his friends and spend a few years in isolation and exclusion and solitary study; and so he built for himself a hut on the banks of the Nile, like the hermits of old, and there for years devoted himself to study and to the perfection of himself for the great revelation. And the great revelation came.

Luria then decided to go to Palestine, to Safed, because in Safed lived the great teachers of Cabala. In Safed Luria at once attracted the attention of the people; he seemed so much greater and more powerful in soul and in his grasp of mysterious things than everybody about him. They called him ".....the Lion," and his disciples soon became known as ".....the Lion whelps."

Legend speaks of Luria as holding converse with birds, flowers and inanimate things, as radiating from himself a potency that was able to cure people. Cabala makes for hero worship, and Luria was warshipped as a great hero. He had a small group of disciples and taught them the mysteries of faith and of God. He never wrote a book but his disciples took notes, and his notes are found scattered in the books of his disciples.

He built no system of Cabala, but seemed to have dwelt on all these things of which I spoke this morning; God, the emanations from God, how we can come in contact with God, the power of words, of letters, of numbers; the qualities and attributes of God as they reflect themselves in man; speculations concerning the

Messiah, when he is to come and how he is to come; the power of dreams and the meaning of dreams, and all these things which came to be known as astrology and necromancy and physiognomy--the study of the face and its implications--divination, charm,--all these things were the subject matter for Isaac Luria and his disciples.

But, more than that, he laid great emphasis upon ethics, because man was a little world--a microcosm, of which God was the macrocosm--the great world; man must try to imitate God in all his acts, in all his thoughts. Isaac Luria taught purity; Isaac Luria taught humility, which is the chief virtue of the mystics. Isaac Luria taught men how to pray, so that their souls would receive the outflowings of Divinity; Isaac Luria taught men how to be holy. He was thirty-eight when he died, but somehow the charm of his life has remained with the people of Israel as a great inspiration.

It is difficult for you and me, men who live in the Twentieth Century, to have much sympathy with such speculations, but I wish that you would gain a little sympathy for it. We are not altogether free of these things ourselves; there are still a number among us who are dreadfully afraid of the number 13; who will never undertake to do anything on Friday, the 13th; there is still a good number of us who never, never would walk under a ladder; and there is still a good number of us who will always knock on wood for one reason or another. And how

many among us are afraid of dreams and the meaning of dreams, and of premonitions. That is in the Twentieth Century. Now think yourself back four hundred years, with science undeveloped, psychology unknown, the science of the sub-conscious a blank, the laws of nature unknown, evolution a thing not yet known to the people, when chemistry was still alchemy, when the scholastics of the school still debated the important question of how many angels could stand on the point of a needle,--and you will gain a little sympathy and understanding for the labors of these men.

They were trying to find the same reality for which you and I are struggling today, but their means were a little cruder because they knew less; they utilized the things which came to their hands to find that soul-satisfying reality which they sought. They left this wonderful thing with our people--and we are indebted to the mystics for it. They saved Judaism first from a cold intellectualism such as Maimonides tried to impose upon the people; and then they saved it, furthermore, from a dry legalism, such as the Rabbis of the Middle Ages tried to impose upon the people. The one tried to make of Judaism philosophy, and the other tried to make of Judaism law.

Now, these mystics tried to make of Judaism intense life. Maimonides was anxious to make Judaism agree with Aristotle. The mystics were anxious to make man at one with God. Maimonides and the legalists robbed

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Judaism of its warmth, of its enthusiasm, of the driving force; they made of Judaism something static. These mystics made of Judaism a dynamic force, a driving power, a yearning for reality; they introduced an enthusiasm into Jewish life, a faith and hope and warmth which Judaism lacked; and there can be no religion without these things.

And they helped the people to endure the terrible hardships of the Middle Ages. The mind and the development of the mind could not comfort them, and the infinite observances of the law, and the fine speculations of the Rabbis could not satisfy their soul; but the mystics among Israel were able to give food to the hungry soul of Israel. When the world was cold around them they were able to kindle a fire of warmth--faith--and keep it aglow to warm the life of Israel during the centuries of persecution and darkness.

They brought God down to the people and taught men that God is with them walking by their side; that God can be reached; that God is their kinsman; that God is their friend. That is the great contribution of the mystics. They made of Judaism not a religion of the schools, but a popular religion; and they taught men that to pray is much more important than to study.

I wish that a bit of that would come into our own religion today. You know reformed Judaism has suffered from the same thing that the religion of Maimonides suffered from. It is too intellectual. The founders of

reformed Judaism tried to have Judaism agree with.....
just as Maimonides tried to have Judaism agree with
Aristotle; and reformed Judaism became rational, it became
logical, it became intellectual, but it lost the intense
fervor, the passion, the enthusiasm, the mysticism, that
makes real religion of value, and of power and influence
in the lives of men.

I have said more than once that we are guided
in our conduct not by our mind but by our soul; and that
is the function of religion--not to train our minds but
to perfect, to purify our souls, to reach down to the
mainsprings of human conduct; to refine our emotions and
our passions that drive us on to heights of sublimity or
drag us down to depths of infamy. That is the function
of religion.

We ourselves need not so much a religion of
sanity, a religion that is logical and sound, a religion
that may be proved by syllogism; what we need is a religion
that will bring inspiration, that will bring joy and
happiness into our lives; a religion that will control our
thinking, and our words, and our actions; a religion that
will purify us and lift us up; a religion that will give us
courage and strength against all the doubts and perplexities
and failures and disillusionments of this life; a religion
that will give us courage, even when standing by the brink
of the grave of our dearest and most precious hopes, to be
able to say, "The Lord is with me, and I shall not be afraid."

That is what your children need; what they will need as they grow up and go out into the world and face the cruelties and the hardness of life. They will need not so much a refined intellect, a strong mind, but they will need love and enduring faith in the spiritual values of life, a belief in the worthwhileness of the holy life, the good life, the pure life; they will need God, the God of whom man can say, "The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want." "Even though I walk in the shadow of the valley of death, Thou art with me. Thy rod and Thy staff, they comfort me."

Religion is either that or it is nothing. It is either a quest for immediate and direct communion with God; it is either a passionate and holy contemplation of creation and its Creator; it is either an approach to the eternal riddles of the universe--infinity and eternity, life and death, sorrow and happiness, good and evil, health and sickness,--and approach to these problems by a transcendent faith, by the promptings of a heart attuned to the infinite, by a soul liberated, or it is a husk that cannot fill and satisfy.

I wish a bit of the Jewish mysticism of Luria would come back into Jewish life. We need what they call.....--enthusiasm; we need what they call--joy, happiness. We have had too much of solemnity and sobriety and a spirit of depression and formality. We need a joy that will run through all our

thoughts and all our lives. ~~Then~~ Judaism will be what
it is to be: "a fountain of life" for all who find it.

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