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What is Wrong with Orthodoxy? What is Wrong with Reform?,
1921.

LECTURE BY RABBI ABBA H. SILVER, ON
"WHAT IS WRONG WITH ORTHODOXY--WHAT IS
WRONG WITH REFORM," AT THE TEMPLE,
SUNDAY MORNING, APRIL 24th, 1921,
CLEVELAND, OHIO.

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I am quite sure that after I have concluded my address on What is Wrong With Orthodoxy and What is Wrong With Reform, my orthodox friends will say: "Well, what could you expect from a reform rabbi?" And my reform friends will be accusing me of orthodox heresy.

I am not going to engage this morning in religious polemics. Of all futile and hopeless things polemics are about the most futile and the most hopeless. Men soon come to realize that no one has a monopoly of true religion, that all religion is, after all, only a groping in the dark, and that our kind Father in Heaven credits us not with the truth which we have, or the truth which we ought to have, but with the honesty and the sincerity of our seeking that truth.

There is no royal road to God, and all the bigotry and intolerance of the world, and all the cruelty of the world let loose by religious fanatics, is due to this one illusion: that there is such a thing as a royal road to God. Our task today, I take it, friends, is to convert every man to his own religion, and not to convert a man to another man's religion. This would be a happy

world, indeed, if every Christian were truly a Christian, and every Jew were truly a Jew. The sad part of it is that Christians are not Christians and Jews are not Jews.

In speaking of what is wrong with orthodoxy and what is wrong with reform, I shall not exploit the one at the expense of the other. That is a favorite pastime of theologians. The Mohammedan, I take it, can be a very good Mohammedan without calling every Christian a dog; and the Christian can be a very good Christian without calling every Mohammedan an infidel. And equally so among ourselves.

Religion, after all, my friends, is very much a matter of birth; it is very much a matter of temperament, of disposition, of environment. Some people are more conservative than others by temperament; some people are less adventuresome, they have less of initiative than others; some people can believe more readily than other people; some have a more developed and cultivated critical faculty; some people prefer rich, colorful paraphernalia of ritual; others prefer the more simple, less formal, more direct communion with God. One is as justified in his preference as the other, and only a narrow man, indeed, would find fault with him who is sincere in his religious belief and in his religious practices. We who know both reform and orthodoxy know how much good there is in both, and how much there is not good, and so we shall not devote ourselves to the pleasant pastime of exalting the one at

the expense of the other, because we know both the strength and the weakness of each.

I shall try this morning to lay bare a little of this weakness that is found both in orthodoxy and in reform, with a view toward the strengthening of both. I take it that reform is here to stay for a good long while, and so is orthodoxy, especially with the recent influx of Russian immigrants; orthodoxy will receive a new birth and a new lease of life in this country. And the quality of this orthodoxy as it is to be in the days to come will affect us all, and so we are concerned primarily not with the championing of one and the depreciating of the other, but with revealing that which is unwholesome in each, so that each may grow stronger and become more serviceable in Jewish life.

I cannot help repeating this thought: that the more progressive we become and the more civilized we become, the more we become differentiated, the more we begin to differ one from another, and only one who has a very simple and naive mind can expect in the days to come that all Jews in this land, or the world over, will think alike on matters religious, and will observe the same customs and the same practices. It is best to find the common meeting ground, the basic things, and preserve them, and let each land or each generation for itself work out the other things.

Now, when I speak of what is wrong with orthodoxy

and what is wrong with reform, I do not want you to feel for a moment that I believe there is nothing good in the one or the other. I am not a pessimist; I do not believe that Judaism has died. I know that there has developed among certain circles of our people a tendency to shout from the housetops on every occasion that Judaism is dying, especially when the occasion is one for the raising of funds. If people need money for a Talmud-Torah, and so on, the cry at once is raised that unless we do that Judaism is **dying**, and so hasten and bring your shekels.

There is an element of the eternal in Judaism--and that is one of the supreme convictions of my life; an element of the eternal which will make Judaism survive even its orthodox and its reform rabbis. I think it was Zangwill who said that the vices of the Jew are on the surface, but the virtues are deep laid and unseen. And that is wonderfully true. We readily see our vices and our failings, but only the man of keen insight and of great faith is able to look down to the great depths and see the eternal character, the enduring quality of strength of our faith and of our peoples.

On the surface of the waters, my friends, there are many cross-currents that give one the impression of confusion, hopeless confusion, but deep down beneath the surface of the waters are those swift and smooth channels that move on steadily and irresistibly. And so I want you to feel that with all my criticism I am extremely

optimistic about the future of Judaism in America; and I can see the first signs of the revival today.

First of all, what is wrong with orthodoxy? I have no quarrel with the real orthodox Jew; I have no quarrel with its theory or with its practice. The real orthodox Jew who is true to the ancient dictum--"Learn, teach, observe, practice,"--with him I have no quarrel at all. I may differ with him radically; I may not be able to accept his theology; I may not be able to accept the first principle of his theology--the law in its completion was given to Moses on Mount Sinai, and that therefore it has a binding validity upon all succeeding generations; I may not believe in the binding forces of all the Mosaic and rabbinic laws; I may not believe in the resurrection of the physical body--one of the tenets of an orthodox religion; I may not believe in the coming of a personal Messiah. But I have no quarrel with the man who does believe in these things. He may be a much poorer man because of his faith. For me and for hundreds of thousands the development of science, the advance in historical knowledge, the study of comparative religion, Biblical criticism, psychology, and what not, have made these faiths impossible of belief among ourselves; others may readily believe in them.

But it is with the man who neither believes in these things, nor practices in full the teachings of the
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orthodox, who still, for some unknown reason, would call

himself orthodox, that I would have a word with. There has developed in American Jewish life in recent years a new type of orthodoxy. Some call it neo-orthodoxy. It is made up principally of such men as are neither orthodox in their belief nor in their practice, but who would like to see orthodoxy observed by other people--a sort of orthodoxy by proxy. They like all the conveniences and all the comforts that a very liberal religion would give them, and yet they would insist upon a theology and upon a practice rigid and rigorous for the other fellow. They would like to run with a hare and hunt with a hound.

Now, that leads, to my mind, to a demoralization of character, and to something which approaches very much an ugly word--hypocrisy. We are developing in this country a peculiar type of Jew. You know him, and I know him. He is the sort of a Jew who would violate the Sabbath without any qualms of conscience, and yet would insist upon being married in his hat; the sort of Jew that would ride on Sabbath and holidays, but would park his machine two blocks away from the synagogue; the kind of Jew that would eat trefa in every restaurant or hotel, but would keep up some form of discipline of kosher in his home; the kind of Jew that insists upon two days holiday and observes neither.

Now, I realize that it is much more difficult to be an orthodox Jew than to be a reform Jew. I realize furthermore that it is much more difficult to be a

consistent orthodox Jew today than it was fifty years ago in Europe, in a somewhat ghettotized life. I realize that it oftentimes takes supreme sacrifice to be a consistent orthodox Jew. It is because of that that I maintain that no one ought dare call himself an orthodox Jew who is not willing to make these sacrifices, who would parade under false colors, violating the fundamentals of orthodox religion, and yet call himself, in protest I suppose, orthodox.

The neo-orthodox of this land has not developed a theology of its own, a discipline of conduct of his own; he has not succeeded in adjusting himself as yet to the life of the country, and in correlating his religious practice with the life of the country; and he has not worked out a living faith for his children. And that is sad. He will not have his child a reform Jew, and his child will not be an orthodox Jew, and so the child slowly but surely drifts into irreligion, into non-religion. The old discipline does not hold; no new discipline acceptable has been evolved, and a young generation is growing up that neither knows the old nor the new.

It is a great mistake, my friends, to think, as some of us think, that every man who is not a reform Jew is ipso facto an orthodox Jew. I venture to say that the vast numbers of our people are neither orthodox nor reform; they are either irreligious, or non-religious, or anti-religious. The so-called masses of our people, and the

so-called working classes of our people are not orthodox by any stretch of the imagination, and are not reform; and so the people whose life has been sanctified by religion, the people whose supreme raison d'etat is is permitting hundreds of thousands of its sons and daughters to go faithless and Godless.

American orthodox Judaism has not devoted itself as much as it should have to the spread and the preservation of Jewish learning. Of that I shall speak, too, when I come to the subject of what is wrong with reform. In this great land of ours, with close onto four millions of Jews, there is one modern theologic school for the training of conservative rabbis,--just one school in the whole land; and that school is constantly in financial straits. The financial head of the school is a reform Jew, and the whole board, with the exception of one man, is composed of reform Jews.

It is well for those young and enthusiastic graduates of that institution who delight in calling reform Judaism and reform Jews all sorts of names, to bear this fact in mind: that the only institution making for modern orthodox learning in this land is supported almost exclusively by reform Jews. In a city like Cleveland, with its one hundred thousand Jews, there are perhaps two or three Talmud-Torahs where there should be ten or twenty.

Orthodoxy must begin to organize itself along lines of education, for that was its strength in the days

gone by. There is need of a consistent definition of its position; there is need of the development of a discipline of Jewish life in orthodoxy that will be consistent with American life and readily acceptable by the great number of orthodox Jews of the rising generation; there is need of greater sacrifices to be brought by our fellow Jews of the orthodox convictions; there is greater need of Jewish learning, of Jewish study, of Jewish schools--education.

It is not enough, my friends, for an orthodox Jew to say, "I am not a reform Jew, and therefore I am an orthodox Jew." To be an orthodox Jew means subscribing to a definite theology, subscribing to a definite mode of conduct, subscribing to a definite discipline in life; it implies duties and responsibilities.

So much for orthodoxy. But there is much that is wrong with reform Judaism as well. Reform Judaism, my friends, has not reached the masses of our people. It has been circumscribed within a certain social circle. I do not know whether it is because its spirit has not been sufficiently democratic, or whether its liturgy and its mode of life does not appeal to the masses, or whether our masses do not respond to any religious appeal, but the fact does remain that we have not reached the masses of our people, no more so than orthodoxy. If we have reduced tradition and traditional observances to a minimum, many of us have not observed even that minimum.

I do not know whether you realize, men and women,

that no religion can endure unless its devotees submit to a certain religious mode of conduct, to a certain set of customs and practices and observances which develop habits of conduct, which stimulate, which hold together the group or the community. Merely a profession of faith, merely an adherence to certain abstract principles is not sufficient to perpetuate a religious group. There is required a form of organization, there is required a discipline to keep a faith potent, virile, active and telling in human life. We have lost that.

An idea, my friends, must express itself in some concrete way in order to catch the eye, to attract and to hold; especially is that true with children. Children learn by seeing and by doing and not by being talked to. A child that grows up in a home the very atmosphere of which is religious, a home that keeps alive the beautiful and meaningful symbols and ceremonies and practices of our faith, which impart poetry and romance to the children,--a child raised in such a home and in such an atmosphere will instinctively imbibe a religious sentiment; it will remain with him, it will mould his character, it will develop him; you will not have to preach to him.

We have lost that in many homes. There has developed in our ranks a sort of religious bolshevism; every Jewish layman is an authority all by himself on matters religious. He is an authority on what should be kept and

what should not be kept; he is an authority on what should be observed and what should not be observed--a rather unfortunate sort of individualism that does not make for the strength of the group.

Now the time has come for our Jewish laymen to realize that just as it is important for a soldier to submit to a discipline in order to keep the morale of an army, so is it important for him to submit to a religious regimen, a mode of conduct, a set of observances and practices in order to keep up the fine morale of our faith and of our life.

There is something else that we lack. We lack that which the real orthodox Jew has to a marvelous degree; we lack a real spirit of piety; we have forgotten how to pray; we have lost all divine intimacy. We have talked ethics and morals and all the formalism of ethical doctrines. We have somehow, but hesitatingly, almost apologetically,

Reform Judaism a hundred years ago began not as a religious revival, not as an evangelistic movement, not to stimulate the fires of devotion, but was a rationalization movement, to rationalize our faith, to make it more in concordance with the spirit of the time. That was well; that was necessary; that was inevitable. But in this process of rationalizing our faith we have, in a way, denuded it of conduct, we have driven out that all-sustaining spirit of mysticism without which no religion

can be a living religion.

I tell you, men and women--and I hope I have at all times emphasized this thought--that while we have hundreds of thousands of deeply pious, beautifully devotional souls among our reform people, I know of many that somehow have lost the spirit, many who have lost the way to God. There are all too few of us who, in moments of real suffering, in moments of disillusionments, in moments when everything seems to slip from our fingers and all we have built crashes down to ruin, in moments when we are alone, can reach out and touch the hem of the shachima, of God's robe of glory. There are all too few of us who go to our prayer books and pour out our soul to the listening ears of a kind and merciful Father.

Piety, my friends, the sustaining influence of the divine presence in our life--that faith that will enable us to say, "I belong to my beloved God, and my beloved belongs to me"--to walk with God in the land of the living; that faith we have somehow lost sight of; we do not give it to our children, so that when they grow up and are lost in the mazes of life's perplexities, when they begin to seek amidst all the confusion of life some abiding reality, they do not turn to the God of Israel, our God, and say, "Verily, He is the fountain of life." But they seek in strange folds for that which will satisfy the hunger and the thirst of their days. Real religion, real piety--that is the great lack in our lives.

And lastly, my friends, we have been just as guilty as our orthodox friends in neglecting the education of our children. I wonder whether you realize how many hours your children are devoting to Jewish education. I venture to say that a liberal estimate would be forty hours a year--just about a day and a half out of 365 days in a year are devoted to Jewish literature and Jewish history and Jewish religion. And then you wonder why our children, when they are confirmed, know so little. They cannot know more.

It is all wrong--this curriculum of Jewish education which we have taken over from the non-Jew. We cannot make our children loyal, enlightened and proud Jews, able to meet the world as our forefathers met all adversity, when we devote just a day and a half out of a year to Jewish education. You must give us more of your children's time; you must give us at least as much time as your children devote to dancing or other amusement. I do hope that a day will come when our children will attend school three and four times a week. And the day will come when our homes will supplement, instead of rendering nugatory and valueless the teachings of the Sunday school,--our homes will supplement, strengthen and exemplify the teachings of our religious schools.

I wonder whether you realize, men and women, how few students in our reform rabbinical school come from reform homes. That tells the story. If reform Judaism

cannot of its own strength supply men teachers--rabbis who will continue the traditions of our faith and our people, then it is not justifying its existence; and you will never send students to rabbinical colleges unless, while the children are young, you will train the boys into real knowledge and not give them a smattering of information.

In other words--and this will be my last word--of the reform Jew I would ask greater loyalty to his synagogue, to the observances of his synagogue; greater loyalty to the group, to the needs of the group, to the tremendous problems of our race in all parts of the world. Of the reform Jew I would ask a spirit of piety, a spirit of real religion, a prayerful, reverential spirit in his home. Of the reform Jew I would ask a stronger application to Jewish learning, to Jewish scholarship, to Jewish education--not alone for your children but for yourselves.

Now, of my orthodox friends I would ask a more consistent, a more honest, a more sincere understanding of orthodoxy in America; an attempt made to make of orthodoxy an acceptable, a lovely, a desirable mode of religious life for your children. You cannot have Polish Judaism in America, nor Russian Judaism in America. The Judaism of Russia was all-sufficient for Russia, hence it existed and was good; but you cannot forcibly and completely transplant a type of Judaism, with all its details, that was all-sufficient and beneficent in another land, to new conditions, new environments and new circumstances. You

must set out deliberately and honestly to make that orthodox fit in and fit in beautifully, as it can be made to fit in, in American life. And you, too, devote yourselves to Jewish learning, building Talmud-Torahs, building your higher schools of learning, building the teachers' seminaries. And support them.

For orthodox and reform there are two roads leading to the same shrine of God's truth; some prefer the one, and some prefer the other; both are good. For the men who walk these roads walk in sincerity, in consecration of spirit, in purity of motive. Both seek God.

