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126

Mystery, Mysticism, and Religion, 1922.

LECTURE BY RABBI ABBA H. SILVER, ON
"MYSTERY, MYSTICISM AND RELIGION," AT
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It is very difficult, indeed, to define the term mysticism. I suppose it is as difficult to define the term mysticism as it is to define almost any other psychic phenomena. And the difficulty entailed is not a reflection upon the reality of the thing that you want to define, but rather is it an indictment upon the shortcomings of our intellectual equipments; we are not intellectually equipped sufficiently to define all reality and all spiritual values.

It is a fact that every great religion has an element of the mystic in it. Professor McDonald, an authority on Mohammedanism, recently said that every thinking, every religious Moslem was a mystic. Buddhism is, of course, one vast system of mystic experience. Christianity began as a mystic religion, and found its noblest expression among the mystics of the Middle Ages and the Reformation; and our own religion, in spite of the fact that so many have attempted--to my mind needlessly--to prove that Judaism is a rational religion,--I say that our own religion has a very deep and a very rich vein of mysticism running right through it from the beginnings of time to the present day.

Already in the Bible we find it in the legends and the myths and the songs and those visions of Ezekiel and Daniel; you have the real elements of mysticism.

JOSEPH T. KRAUS
Shorthand
Reporter
CLEVELAND

you have a more luxuriant crop of it in post-Biblical literature--in the so-called Apocrypha, the hidden writings; and the Apocalypse; and in the Talmud, that encyclopedia of Jewish learning covering a period of perhaps eight hundred years.

In the Talmud you have, alongside of the law, the Halakah, a vast amount of lore; the Haggadah, full of mystic teaching concerning the soul, concerning the Messiah, concerning the mystic value of numbers and the alphabet. The authoritative religion, the formal religion, always tries to keep these things out, to keep them beyond the pale.

The Mishnah, for example, which is the code of Jewish law of the first two centuries of the common era, deliberately omits any reference to an angel, any reference to the Messiah. That is not found in the Mishnah. But in the Haggadah, in the lore which is scattered right through the Talmud and through all the Midrashim or commentaries on the Bible of a later period, you have a very abundant and profuse amount of mystic speculation, mystic thought.

That is the popular religion that demanded that; that is the food which the human heart and soul craved for. The Rabbis had no hesitancy in meeting that need of the heart and soul. In later times, in the period of the the great rabbis who presided over

JOSEPH T. KRAUS
Shorthand
Reporter
CLEVELAND

the schools in Babylonia, which at that time, in the eighth and the ninth and the tenth centuries, were the great centers of Jewish learning throughout the world,-- I say, in the period of the you have mystic lore developing; and even the great rabbis in Cabala, like Saadia, who wrote one of the great philosophic treatises on Judaism, had no hesitancy in writing a commentary on the book Sefer Yezirah, the Book of Creation, which became the text book of later Cabala and later Jewish mysticism.

From the tenth century on philosophy rather than mysticism holds the stage of Jewish thought, and the philosophic movement, the attempt to define Judaism as a system of philosophic thought, of metaphysics, gained strength, and culminates in that titan, that master mind of Jewish thought--Moses Maimonides.

Moses Maimonides attempted to show what a rational religion Judaism is, and how much in harmony it is with the teachings of Aristotle, the great Greek philosopher; and he, unfortunately, reduced the full content of Jewish thought and Jewish faith to a system of dry, spiritless, fervorless syllogisms--logic.

And then the reaction began to set in. People realized that such a religion is not the religion that is food for human souls and hearts; that such a speculation may drive men away from God, even as it tries to bring men nearer to God. And so in the thirteenth century that great movement known as the Cabalistic

JOSEPH T. KRAUS
Shorthand
Reporter
CLEVELAND

movement began. I haven't the time just now to define Cabala, with all that it involves, but suffice it for our present purposes to say that Cabala, which means mystic teachings handed down early from teacher to desciple through the ages, was not the expression of this mysticism in the Jewish religion.

In 1305 there appeared the great book Zoa, the text book of all later day Cabala; and for centuries thereafter, with the decline of philosophy, there grew and developed Cabala and mysticism in Jewish life. And that movement reached its culmination in the sixteenth century in the great school of Safed in northern Palestine, where the teachers like Moses Cordovero, and Isaac Luria, concerning whom I spoke last year, and Chayim Vital taught.

From the sixteenth century the movement began to degenerate into mystery, into miracle mongering, into messiah-hunting, and that degeneracy reached its most tragic expression in the movement of the false messiah. And then for a hundred years Cabala was relegated to the background; people were beginning to be afraid of it, and the philosophic and the legal phase of Judaism again came to the forefront, until the middle of the eighteenth century (we are now approaching the man I wish to discuss this morning), when this mystic spirit, always present in Jewish religion but submerged, at times eclipsed, at times relegated to the background, again pushed forward in a movement which engulfed half of Jewry.

JOSEPH T. KRAUS
Shorthand
Reporter
CLEVELAND

which came to be known as the movement of Hasidism, whose founder was this man, Israel Ba'al-Shem. The great Jewish historian Duke now estimates the number of Hasidim living today as five million, which is almost more than one-third of Israel; so that the movement is something to be reckoned with as a tremendous phase in Jewish life.

So that as you scan Jewish history, you cannot help but come to the conclusion that the definition of Judaism, as a rationalistic religion, is, to say the least, imperfect. Judaism has more than one system of ethics, and Judaism is much more than a system of abstract principles concerning God; Judaism is also a religion of divine intimacies, a religion of human pilgrimage to the dwellingplace of divinity; a religion of glow and fervor and enthusiasm; a religion of prayer.

Philosophy and theosophy--philosophy and mysticism--may be said to have run side by side in Jewish thought; they supplemented one another, or corrected one another. In philosophy the Jewish intellect never permitted mysticism to run riot, as mysticism has done in some religions; in mysticism the heart of the Jew never permitted philosophy to starve the content of Jewish life, to reduce it to a formula, to a syllogism. And so the two have proved that marvelous synthesis, that marvelous union in Jewish life, which, to my mind, has preserved Judaism.

JOSEPH T. KRAUS
Shorthand
Reporter
CLEVELAND

You find that synthesis in the great Jewish thinkers of all times. I mentioned Saadia, the philosopher, who wrote a commentary on a mystic book. I could just as well have mentioned the great legalist of the thirteenth century--Nachmanides, who was a great mystic; I could have mentioned the classic example of Joseph Caro, the famous author of Shulhan 'Aruk, a certain code of law in force today in orthodox Jewry. Joseph Caro was the greatest legalist of his day, the greatest Talmudist of his day, and yet he wrote mystic treatises. He claimed to have been nightly informed by a spirit which was the angel of the Mishnah to him, concerning vast and profound and mystic truths, which he incorporated in his writing.

And so in Jewish life you do not find that conflict between reason and mystic speculation that you find in other religions. Judaism, somehow, found that spiritual alchemy that blended the two to make them one.

Now, then, what is mysticism? It is not mystery. That is one thought I would like to leave with you this morning. To be a mystic is not necessarily to be mysterious. Mysticism is much more than vagueness. Jewish philosophy or Jewish mysticism comes of two kinds of mysticism: one is called the speculative mysticism--the Cabala Iyunit, and the other is called the practical mysticism--the Cabala Ma-asith.

Now, the practical kind of mysticism has to do with things like charms and formulas and spells

JOSEPH T. KRAUS
Shorthand
Reporter
CLEVELAND

and the medicinal value of herbs and healings; the speculations concerning the coming of the Messiah, and the interpretation of dreams--which, by the way, was the beginning of the science of psychoanalysis, just like alchemy is the beginning of the science of chemistry.

Now, then, practical mysticism very often degrades to the level of the mysterious, because that is veiled in secrecy; these are the hidden things; and every charlatan, every quack, finds in this practical Cabala an opportunity to exploit the credulity of men and women. And Cabala produced its charlatans. Every garden of flowers produces its weeds. That sort of mystery you find in all religions from primitive days to the present day. You find it among the savages with the medicine man who puts a vile looking mask over his face, and paints himself and shakes the totem and beats the drum. That is a mysterious rite to fascinate people, to impress people.

Well, that is the lowest form of Cabala. That is really not mysticism at all; real mysticism has nothing to do with the mysterious; it has nothing to do with secrecy; it always speaks of light; the one word most often in use among all mystics of all religion is light--illumination, brilliancy. Their entire task was seeking after the real light--the illuminating truth.

Mysticism is nothing else than the intense personal contemplation of reality. Mysticism is the

JOSEPH T. KRAUS
Shorthand
Reporter
CLEVELAND

pilgrimage of the human soul to the shrine of unity with God; mysticism is the quest for the inner reality of things and for their inner harmony; and mysticism is the discipline which leads a man to find this hidden meaning, this hidden light, this inner truth and this inner harmony. Mysticism is the successive stages of the soul development and the successive states of exultation and ecstasy which a human being climbs to reach the throne of God.

I said it is a quest for the inner reality. Let me try to make myself a little clearer. Here all around me is a world--the universe of God. I can see but very little of the world; I can apprehend less because my five senses, the avenues of cognition, the channels through which I apprehend truth, are imperfect and faulty--untrue; they can give me but a limited view of reality, and they can show me, perhaps, but one or two phases of it, while there may be an infinite number of phases of reality to the universe which is about me.

But the world is there and God is there, and somehow I ought to be able to get beyond myself, beyond these five senses, to force my way through the walls that confine me, that incarcerate me, that keep me from seeing the light beyond. If I only had the key, the mystic key with which to unlock the doors leading to the great truth beyond, if I only had the divine intuition, I would see the real essence of things, I would see truth and reality--

JOSEPH T. KRAUS
Shorthand
Reporter
CLEVELAND

and God!

Now, there is a way of finding this mystic key, and that comes through discipline of self; that comes, first of all, through a conquest of self, through a subjection of all that is material and animalic within me, through the subjection of all the passions and the desires and the craving and the ambitions that enslave me, holding me bound to the earth. If I can free myself from the bondage of this flesh, which is a sort of Klipah, as the Cabalist calls it--a shell, a husk, which keeps my soul from merging with the great Soul beyond, and my life from losing itself, and, in a sense, from finding itself in the great life of the eternal; if I can destroy by an effort of will this earthly self of mine; if I can lose all pride and all vain-glory and all opinions that I may hold of value, that are really not opinions concerning truth, then there may be a way of finding this mystic key.

And then some day the light will break through upon me, even as light comes to a blind man who has never seen it before; it will come like an inundation, like an influx, like a revelation. And I will then know reality, and I will then know the essence of things, and I will then know God; and, knowing Him, I will have found the greatest good in the world.

That is the underlying faith of the mystic.

JOSEPH T. KRAUS
Shorthand
Reporter
CLEVELAND

It is difficult, very difficult, to understand it; even as difficult as one who has no ear for music to understand a symphony. But to the mystic it is the essence of life. So that you see that mysticism is not a system of doctrines; it is a temperament. You must have the temperament to be a mystic; you must have the temperament to be an artist. If you have not it, you simply cannot be a mystic. If your mind is absolutely logical, you will have great difficulty in fathoming the profoundness of the mystic soul.

The mystic cares very little for authority, for books, for creeds, for dogmas, for churches, for ecclesiastical forms: he has one authority in his life, and that is the God that dwells within him; He is his one source of authority, his one inspiration. Books and Bibles and creeds and dogmas may have value; they may be very well for the uninitiated; they have a pedagogic value, they help to train the masses, but they are only symbols after all--symbols of an inner truth, and that inner truth comes to the real mystic directly, immediately, intuitively, by the contact of his soul with the all-Soul of the universe.

The one great principle of mysticism is love. A Mohammedan, Sufi, once uttered this thought: "Oh, my God, when I speak of thee in public, I invoke thee as one invokes a Lord; but when I speak of thee in private,

JOSEPH T. KRAUS
Shorthand
Reporter
CLEVELAND

I speak of thee as one invokes a beloved one." In public I say unto thee: "Oh, my God"; in private I say unto thee: "Oh, my beloved." That sums it all up.

The Jewish mystic phrased it somewhat differently when he used that beautiful sentence of the Song of Solomon to express his relationship with God: "I belong to my beloved, and my beloved belongs to me." One of the great principles of Hasidism--one of the three cardinal principles of Hasidism was his clinging unto God, identifying one's whole life and the experiences of one's whole life, and all the needs and all the longings of one's life, merging them all in the unity of the one--clinging unto Him as one clings to a dear friend, to a kinsman. That is mysticism.

And, lastly, the mystic saw God everywhere and in everything. The philosopher may say God created the world and then somehow removed Himself from the world; the philosopher can speak of God as transcendent--removed, very little concerned with the affairs of men, with their struggles and their strivings. The mystic, on the other hand, says: "No. God created the world, but God is indwelling in the world, in every blade of grass, in every wave of the sea, in every longing of the human soul, in every tear that falls from the sinner's eye, in the place of sin and in the place of evil--everywhere! everywhere! there is God!"

JOSEPH T. KRAUS
Shorthand
Reporter
CLEVELAND

"Matter is not only the garment in which God clothes himself, but it is of the very essence of divinity. God had to restrict Himself; God had to confine Himself; God had to express His greatness so that human beings could see Him and understand Him partly; and so the world was created. But God is there indwelling, within reach of every human soul, and everything sings of God, and everything bespeaks God."

There is a beautiful folk song that came down from these pious men known as the Hasidim, which reads something like this:

"Master of the world, where shall I find thee,

and where shall I not find thee?

East and west and north and south, thou art there;

Above thou art there, below thou art there.

Everywhere thou, only thou, thou alone."

Now, that is pantheism, but pantheism with a living, providential God permeating, controlling and guiding the world. That is the faith of the mystic, and that is real religion.

Now that mystic faith you find in the religion of the Hasid, and was ultimately propounded by the founder, Israel Bahl-Shem. The word Hasid, by the way, simply means a pious man. The Hasidim were men of exceptional piety. Later on the term came to mean the pious man who was very devout and zealous in his faith.

JOSEPH T. KRAUS
Shorthand
Reporter
CLEVELAND

Ba'al-Shem is a very interesting word. The word is found in Jewish history as early as the eleventh century. Ba'al-Shem means the "master of the name." It does not mean a man of good name; it means master of the name; the miracle worker, the man who could perform wonderful things through the medium of God's name; who knew the secret of the manipulation of ^{the} letters of God's name, and so could perform marvelous deeds.

And so from the eleventh century down to the eighteenth, of which we speak, there was a whole series of these wundermenner, of Jewish men of piety, of great devotion, who won for themselves a reputation among peoples. People came to them for counsel, for advice, for healing; and they were known as the Anshe-Shem, the wundermenner.

Israel Ba'al-Shem was one of them, but he was the greatest of all of them. Israel was born of very poor parents in the year, we will say, 1700; we do not know exactly the year of his birth. He was born in a little village on the border between Poland and Wallachia. Very little is known about his life; legend has veiled him in mystery. The few things that stand out are these: at a very early age he was orphaned; he received a very poor schooling; he was never a student; he was never a scholar. He married rather early in life; his wife died; he removed to a village in the Carpathian mountains, settled there.

JOSEPH T. KRAUS
Shorthand
Reporter
CLEVELAND

and remarried there, and for seven years he lived among these beautiful Carpathian mountains, and he imbibed a great deal of love of nature and the love of the world and the joy of life. Through all those years of humble and pious activity he would dig lime for a living, and his wife would wheel the lime on a wagon to the village to sell it. He was a workingman, and in those days a workingman was rather looked down upon by the aristocrats of learning.

At the age of thirty-six, the legend says, he revealed himself; that is to say, becoming conscious of a great psychic gift that was in him, he went from village to village, and from town to town, healing, counseling, helping and spreading the gospel of a new type of Judaism. He was not a reformer; he did not introduce any new dogmas or any new sects; he did not challenge any old dogmas or any old creeds; it was altogether a matter of emphasis; it was altogether a matter of soul.

He left no books. All that we know of him has come down to us from the writings of his disciples, principally of his two major disciples, Baer and Jacob Joseph ha-Kohen. Briefly, what were his teachings? You ought to know Israel Ba'al-Shem. He is a great figure in Jewish thought; he has a message for us today. Just as in the thirteenth century Cabala arose as a reaction to the rationalism of Maimonides and of all who preceded him, so

JOSEPH T. KRAUS
Shorthand
Reporter
CLEVELAND

five centuries later Hasidism arose in the personality of this man, Israel Ba'al-Shem, as a reaction to the dry rot which had set in in rabinnic legalism and speculation.

Judaism had for generations become starved, dry, hackneyed, scholastic, a matter of casuistry a matter of dialectics; Judaism had become almost exclusively a matter of study--the study of the Talmud. Learning--that was the test of character, that was the test of piety. The condition of the Jew of the time was terrible. Suppression, exploitation, uncertainty were the order of the day; the Cossack uprisings fifty years before in Poland, in 1648, had destroyed the economic life of the Polish Jew; his life was harsh, crude, unattractive, and his soul was starved and empty. He asked for food, something to inspire him, something to sustain him, something to give him a little hope in life; and the rabbis gave him laws and disciplines and duties and nothing else.

And Israel Ba'al-Shem then preached a new gospel to these hungry souls. It was a simple faith, a faith of divine intimacy, a faith of warmth, of enthusiasm, a faith of hope. Israel Ba'al-Shem brought unto them a message of life; they welcomed him, and his teachings spread throughout Israel.

First of all, he said, learning is well; it is a good thing to be learned, but it is not the whole of

JOSEPH T. KRAUS
Shorthand
Reporter
CLEVELAND

life. To know the Torah is a meritorious thing, but to pray with great intent so as to establish communion with the spirit above is even more. God desires not so much the brilliant mind as the devout soul. "God desireth the heart of man." And if circumstances have kept you from becoming a great scholar, you are none the less the child of God, in his presence daily; and God is none the less as near to you as he is to the great scholar, the student.

Now, think what a message of hope that ^{the} brought to the tens of thousands of ignorant and the illiterate among Israel, who looked upon themselves as outcasts and were so regarded. Here was a man who brought God nearer unto them, and who brought new life, new hope and a new faith.

And then he said: "Religion is not a matter of duty and fear; religion is a matter of love" --the mystic speaking again. There are three great loves that everyone ought to have in life, he said. There is the love of God, there is the love of the Torah, and there is the love of Israel. That is all there is in life for the Jew; just three devotions, just three supreme loves--God, the Torah, Israel.

And that is the way to serve God--through love. Let others speak of duty, let others speak of fear; we will speak of God as our friend, a friend to whom we can bring the broken bits of our hearts to be wrought again;

JOSEPH T. KRAUS
Shorthand
Reporter
CLEVELAND

the friend who suffers with us and who rejoices with us and who is our kinsman--that is our God.

Think what that meant to those people, hounded and hunted, the prey of every whim of a tyrant, that here was a great friend come into their lives--God, who is with them all the time and near unto them when they called unto Him. That was his second great teaching.

And his third one was this: what is all this sorrow that has come into Jewish life? Why this poignancy and penitence and self-castigation? Why has religion become such a matter of solemnity? Why all this fasting? Why, if you have such a great friend with you as God, rejoice and be glad! To do good is not a painful task; it is the supreme joy of life. And Ba'al-Shem began to preach "the joy of doing good."--the joy of being a Jew; that in spite of persecution, in spite of suffering, and in spite of exile and poverty, they still had the one absolute perfect good in life--God! They still had the Torah; and nothing else counted. And so he built for them a paradise amidst their poverty and squalor; he built for them a fairy-land, where they could find solace and comfort and cheer, when all about them was gloom and darkness.

And, lastly, he brought to them again the message of the mystic. "Think not of God, my children,

JOSEPH T. KRAUS
Shorthand
Reporter
CLEVELAND

he said, "as a great tyrant sitting away up there in Heaven removed from you. Why, look down! there is a flower, and a blade of grass, and a stream, and a grain of sand--and that is God, too! He is there! He is everywhere!"

"There is no place where He is not. In every movement of your soul there is God; in every reach of your thought there is God. Why, even in your misdeeds, in your sins, God is there. Wherever there is life there is the breath of God!"

The artist will take silver and fashion a beautiful goblet and put his soul in it. And when he is through, when the goblet is finished, the artist can step aside and remove himself to a distant land. The goblet is there. But not so with God. God fashioned the world out of His soul, but He does not remove himself and leave his handiwork; because the artist, the human artist, created something out of something else; he created a reality, a substance out of another substance. But God created the world out of himself, and so He is always present in the world.

That is the parable which Ba'al-Shem brings. And God being everywhere, God can be seen everywhere, if men knew but how to look for Him. The trouble is, he said, that the eyes of human beings are trained to look for other things, and so they cannot see God.

JOSEPH T. KRAUS
Shorthand
Reporter
CLEVELAND

A king built for himself a beautiful palace of many rooms, he said, and filled them all with gold and beautiful stones, and he himself he placed in the last of the chambers of his palace; and people came from all parts of the earth to see the king, but they went into the first room and found gold and silver, and they were satisfied and left; some went into the second room and found precious stones, and gathered in all they wished and left; and nobody saw the king, until the king's own son came; he really wanted to see the king, and his eyes were not dazzled with the gold and the silver and the jewels, and so he just walked right into the chamber where the king was. It was such a simple thing to see the king if people really wanted to see him.

That is Ba'al-Shem's parable of how God can be found. That was his teaching; that was the wisdom that he brought to a suffering race. He brought to them joy, life, hope, inspiration; he was a glorious influence for many decades. Hasidism, of course, in the course of time, like all good things, degenerated. It outlived its usefulness; a new day was dawning. Moses Mendelssohn was opening the windows of Jewish life to the Western world; the French Revolution was breaking down the last stronghold of feudalism; a new day was dawning for Israel.

Hasidism soon outlived its usefulness, but like everything that outlives its usefulness, it becomes

JOSEPH T. KRAUS
Shorthand
Reporter
CLEVELAND

an anachronism, a garment that ceases to function; a thing that becomes moldy becomes, in the course of time, degenerate and corrupt. But for generations it served a wonderfully effective and beneficent purpose in Jewish life; it was a stream of new faith poured into the soul of Israel. And Ba'al-Shem will remain a saint in our history.

One word in conclusion. I said that Ba'al-Shem has a message for us. I believe he has; because we reformed Jews are becoming guilty of the same mistake that Maimonides and his predecessors in the thirteenth century were guilty of, and that the rabbis in the eighteenth century were guilty of: we are trying to make of our religion an ethical code, a system of theologic abstractions, metaphysics, speculation. A religion of that kind is doomed.

No religion can live on a syllogism. To make of our faith a dynamic faith, to make it purposeful and real in the lives of ourselves and of the generations to come, we must introduce into it those same three loves, those same three devotions of which Israel-Ba'al-Shem spoke--the love of God, and the love of the Torah, and the love of Israel.

We must become saturated with an unconquerable love for these three eternal verities--God truth and Israel! The servant of God and the message of truth! We must bring back warmth, devotion, consecration,

JOSEPH T. KRAUS
Shorthand
Reporter
CLEVELAND

enthusiasm into our fold. Our religion, too, must cease to be only a matter of mind: it must reach down and touch our souls!

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