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Reel
147

Box
52

Folder
141

The Need of God, 1922.

LECTURE BY RABBI ABBA H. SILVER

SUBJECT: "THE NEED OF GOD."

AT THE TEMPLE - SUNDAY MORNING.

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JOSEPH T. KRAUS
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An eminent psychologist once sent a questionnaire to a group of representative men and women, and the question he propounded was this: "If you became convinced that God did not exist, would it make any difference in your life?" He received quite a variety of replies, as you can well imagine. One answered, "It would make no difference at all in my life." A second one answered, "It would make me feel terribly lonely"; a third one answered, "I should then be afraid to face either life or death"; ~~and~~ a fourth one answered, "What would then become of all my dreams?"; and a fifth one said, "If I should become convinced that God does not exist I would blow my brains out."

Now this last reply seems rather extreme, and yet those of you who are acquainted with the development of human thought will recall that not long after the theory of evolution was launched in the world, and when because of the scarcity of information about it men jumped to the conclusion that the world was controlled by blind, unheeding forces, that there was no supreme intelligence in the universe,--I say immediately following the launching of this theory there was an epidemic of suicides throughout England and through Western Europe.

Tolstoy in his "Confessions" says, "There was a period in my life when everything seemed to be crumbling, the very foundations of my convictions were beginning to give way, and I felt myself going to pieces. There was no

sustaining influence in my life and there was no God there, and so that every night before I went to sleep I made sure there was no rope in my room lest I be tempted during the night to hang myself from the rafters of my room; and I stopped from going out shooting lest I be tempted to put a quick end to my life and to my misery."

You see to some of us ideas do not count for much. We are not as sensitized to ideas as some people are. But ideas really are dynamite; ideas are much more real than things; and some people react to ideas and convictions much more immediately than they do to external forces and to external objects. And so it is quite an important thing to most men to know whether God exists or whether God does not exist.

It might perhaps be well at the outset to distinguish between God and the church of God, between religion and religious institutions. We sometimes are tempted to confuse the two. Most of the criticism made against religion is really made against certain religious forms and ceremonies and creeds and dogmas and institutions. Well, I believe that we have need for institutions. Any idea ultimately, if it is to become effective in human life, will express itself in some kind of an institution. I believe that we need creeds; ultimately a great human conviction will express itself in a formula, in a creed.

But very often these institutions and creeds

become so hardened and congealed, so overlaid with the crusts of centuries, that the vital spirit of religion, instead of being enhanced by them, is stifled by them, and they become the enemies of religion. Religion has been terribly abused. I suppose every good thing in life has been terribly abused. Democracy, for example. Democracy may mean the highest conception of government or it may mean Tammany Hall.

Religion has been used by kings and priests and privileged classes to enslave mankind, to keep mankind in the bondage of ignorance and superstition. That is why some of the greatest revolutions in the world were frankly anti-religious. The French Revolution, for example, and the Russian revolution in our own day, were frankly anti-religious, because the forces they were fighting had made an ally of religion; they were using religion as an opiate to keep the masses content through ignorance. Much of that has survived to our own day.

There are some very rich people who believe religion is a good thing for the poor man; and there are some very rich people who build very beautiful churches for the poor man. If you can make the poor man think of the hereafter and leave the here and the now to the rich man, this would be a very happy world for the rich man. That is very much in keeping with the trend of modern times--that a rich man in proportion to the wealth he amasses forsakes his religion because he no longer needs the consolation of religion; he has other consolations in life. The poor man needs the

consolations of religion.

Well, in reality religion is the most revolutionary factor in civilization. Some of the great revolutions in history were prompted by religious convictions. The Puritan revolution in England, for example. The Puritans marched into battle singing songs. The peasant uprisings in the sixteenth century were prompted by religious convictions concerning communism. The earliest Christians were communists. Almost every great religion in its early stages preached the gospel of poverty to the rich not to the poor; because they felt, and perhaps rightly so, that wealth improperly used is an obstacle in the way of spiritual development of the human being--a man becomes choked in the obesity of wealth, and so they warned them about how difficult it is for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven.

Religion is not an ally of the rich or the poor; religion has a message for the rich and the poor; religion is concerned with the soul--the soul of me and the soul of you, and our relations to the over-soul which is God. Religion has to do with the development of human personality, with the development of our common human cultural and spiritual values, and with attitudinizing ourselves, establishing ourselves, in relation to the great cosmic values.

So that when I speak of the need of man for God I do not have in mind a church or an institution or a dogma or a specific revelation given at one time at a certain place: I have in mind the belief in a creative intelligence

in the world whose creatures and co-workers we human beings are. That is the God of whom I speak. Now it is much easier today to speak of God than it was fifty years ago. Among intelligent people fifty years ago the subject of God was taboo, because every wise man then knew that the world was controlled by immutable, impersonal forces; that everything was the effect of a cause, and that that cause was similarly the effect of a preceding cause; that it was all prearranged, inevitable; that there was no such thing as a personality in the universe, a creative will; that it was all blind nature; that it was all a mechanism.

But nowadays they are not so certain of it; nowadays when we speak of evolution we do not necessarily imply that the world is evolving along definite lines, propelled by relentless, blind, heedless forces of natural selection. Today we know the limitations of evolution just as we know the limitations of the human mind; we know that evolution may account for the origin of species, but it cannot account for the origin of life. We know that the ultimate mysteries of the origin of life, of the driving impulse that is in the world, that makes for change, that these cannot be reached by science or by the human mind.

I think it was Bergson who in our own day clearly defined the limitations of the human mind. He said, "When science defines a law science is merely describing a thing as it is--static and fixed--but not a thing in motion." For example, when you see on the moving picture screen a man

running, what you see is a man in successive stages; at each stage he is static; it is only the quick succession of the film that gives you the impression of motion. That is all you see. What is in the heart of the runner when he ran the race, the ideas that went through him, the impulses that urged him on to run, the will that drove him--that you cannot see on the screen at all; all you see is the mechanism of running and nothing else. On your way out you may step into a side room and see a model of a temple, and what you will see will be a complete design of a structure, and you will say "I understand it." But what was in the artist's mind when he shaped that model, when he thought it out, when he created it, when he rejected certain things and introduced others as he planned it, the vital urge, the creative mind in its process of creation,--that you cannot see at all.

Now all that science can tell you about the universe is the finished blue print; the urge, the impulse, the creative energy--that escapes you. And so when you speak about nature being controlled by forces you are simply stating things that you see, that you describe; but the vital urge, the impulse, the creative intelligence that works through the universe--that you cannot see. These are the objects of faith. That is the autonomous, authoritative, relevant faith. That is what religion is.

Now, why need men believe in the existence of a creative intelligence in the world, of which we human beings are creatures and co-workers? Putting aside for the moment

the proofs for the existence of God, if there be such proofs, why do we need God? Do we need Him at all? Why has man evolved a God concept? It has frequently been said that God created man but at a certain time man created God. Well, that is true to this extent: that man is so fashioned and so made that he is compelled out of the needs and the necessities of his own life to create a God idea or else he could not live. In order to exist he must have a God.

I think it was Voltaire, the great cynic and skeptic, who said that if there were no God the human race would be compelled to invent one. We need God as one of the men who answered the questionnaire said--"If I were convinced that there is no God I would feel terribly lonely"--for the loneliness of our life.

Think of it: here we are, human beings lost upon this small revolving orb which we call the earth, a speck in the universe; here we are, ~~being~~ tossed about in the whirlpool of myriads, of ~~infinite~~ stars, planetary systems and solar systems; here we are, shadows of shadows, a bark of a moment upon a sea of eternity; here we are, upon an earth that is fast cooling, that some day may be ice and glaciers; here we are, with the prospect that some day all our cities and our marvelous civilizations will be lost in the silence and in the oblivion of eternal snows; here we are, less than a grain of dust, lonely beings, hapless and helpless.

What gives man a sense of at-homeness? what

gives man a sense of companionship? if not a feeling, an inarticulate feeling, perhaps, an unreasoned feeling, if you like, but a feeling which is a prompting of a soul and an expression of the deepest needs of his life; that somehow he, small insect though he is, is yet allied with the eternal spirit that throbs right through the whole of creation; that small though he is, he is yet a link indispensable in the vast chain that holds the scheme of things together.

Man needs God in order to feel at home in this universe. "God, Thou hast been our dwelling place"--to dwell in God. The at-homeness--that is why man needs God.

He needs God for yet another reason--to give dignity to his life. Here we are, frail bodies, our bodies subject to corruption; a few years and then we are cast into the grave to be subject to dissolution and corruption; here we are, with five senses, our only avenues of cognition--inadequate, poor, faulty; here we are, one nerve diseased and our whole life collapses; here we are, one pain and everything else ceases to exist for us--frail, weak, miserably weak. And we would accomplish nothing in life, and we would feel crushed and humiliated but for the fact that somehow we feel that in that frail, broken body of ours there dwells something that partakes of the nature of the eternal; that in us, temporary as we are, transient, passing, there is resident something which is permanent, abiding, eternal; that our soul is of the substance of things which are indestructible. And so we need God to give dignity to our lives.

And we need Him, I believe, for yet another reason. You and I have certain hopes and certain ideals; and it is the hope and the ideal that makes life worth while, is it not? It is the hope and the ideal that gives grace and charm and beauty to our life and living. And yet if our ideals are exalted, ~~there~~ is no hope that we will ever realize them; it is only the ^{mean} ~~keen~~ ambition that can be realized in one's lifetime, the transcendental ideal; the ideal that is projected into time as a service to humanity, that ideal you and I will never be able to realize fully and completely.

Now, if there were no God, if it all were just blind, careless, unheeding, irrefutable nature, if we were just playthings in a Niagara whirlpool, if we could not in any sense control life, create living and mould life, if we were just playthings of fate, what meaning would our ideals have? Why should we strive? Why should we struggle? Why should we sacrifice? And who is there to underwrite our ideal? Who is there to make us feel that if we fail someone else will take up the torch and carry on?

We need God to underwrite our ideals; we need God in order that we may feel as a child feels in whose hand his fond parent has placed the tool to work with, that when the child gets tired the parent will take the tool from his hand and complete the task or place the tool in someone else's hand. We need the abiding confidence that the Supreme Intelligence in the world will make real things for which we strive with the blood and the sweat of our souls. That is

why we need God.

And perhaps for yet one more reason. We need God in order to be free; we need God in order to emancipate ourselves. Don't you see that if we feel we are a part and parcel of a will that is working through the universe today, constantly creating, constantly evolving new values, new things, that how wonderfully free that conviction makes us? Then there is hope for the human race, then there are fields for the adventure of the human spirit, and there are endless undiscovered vistas which the human mind may look forward to, and we become creators and we become laborers in the vineyard of the Lord; then there is sense in laboring and there is sense in striving, for we are achieving, for we are free. But if we are just entombed in a universe readymade, inexorably fixed for all time, changeless, then we are slaves, doomed to degradation.

There is a beautiful sentence of our rabbis. The Bible says, "The writing of God was engraved upon the two tables of the law." "Do not call it engraved but freedom." Faith in God makes for the emancipation of the human soul. God gave 613 commandments to Moses, say the rabbis, and then the prophet came and reduced them all to one, and this is it: "The righteous man shall live by his faith."

The one commandment is faith, for faith makes us free; just as fear paralyzes action, so hope and faith frees us for endless activity. And that is why we need God, for a great task demands a great faith, and a great life

demands a high faith. Now, you will say there are many good people who do good in the world and do not believe in God; there are many people who are moral and do not believe in God. There are many people who go to vote every so often and do not believe in democracy, who do not understand democracy, its philosophy, its implication. But this is the point: the men who fashioned democracy, the men who projected the ideal of democracy--they believed in it, for if they did not believe in it they never would have achieved it.

You and I can vote out of habit, automatically, carelessly, even when we don't believe in it; but those who suffered and died that democracy may become a fact in life, they had to believe in it; for unless a man believes fully, overwhelmingly, completely in an ideal, that ideal will never come to pass. You and I can be moral today, you and I can live on the high standard of ethical planes out of habit, because of public opinion, because it is the thing to do, because the other way might create unpleasantness; but the men who through struggle and suffering and sacrifice evolved these ideals, the men who proclaimed, "Thou shalt not kill" and "Thou shalt not steal" and "Justice, justice, shalt thou pursue," the men who proclaimed a new message unto the world--they had to believe in it, and they proclaimed it because they believed that that was the will of God.

The prophet who said "Ye shall be holy, and ye shall be poor, and ye shall be righteous," proclaimed these things not in his own name but in the name of God whose

messenger and spokesman he was. He had to believe in God or else he never would have permitted himself to be racked and torn by untoward fortune for the sake of these ideals.

"Love thy neighbor as thyself, for I am the Lord." "Ye shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy." "Ye shall not oppress the poor, for I the Lord am the guardian of the poor." That is how great ideals come to mankind--through overwhelming faith; and if this age of ours is to evolve new values, to bring new truth into the world, and new beauty and new sweetness, it cannot be done, for it never was done, except through an overpowering, resistless onslaught of faith which drives us, whether we will it or no, to proclaim the new truth.

The world today, amidst the wreck and the ruin, needs to evolve new values, and it will only do so when God enters into it really and effectively. That is why, then, that men need God. We need God for the loneliness of our days, because we need companionship, we need a kinsman in our lonely pilgrimage upon this earth.

I We need God because we need a sense of permanence in our days; we need God because we need a sense of dignity and the worth of our own selves; we need God in order to be really, really free. As long as we have not God we are the slaves of things, we are the slaves of wealth, and the slaves of public opinion, and the slaves of beautiful things, and the slaves of position, and the slaves of influence. We are not free; we are not ourselves, our personalities are

fregmentary and broken.

The moment we feel God flowing through us as a stream of living water, we feel ourselves purged and cleansed of all the dross, of all the smallness, of all the things of little meaning and significance, and we come in close contact with the real things, the abiding values, the permanent, enduring verities and sincerities of the universe.

"God is my strength and my song; He has become my salvation."

