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Hereafter, 1923.

"HEREAFTER."

RABBI ABBA HILLEL SILVER.

THE TEMPLE, SUNDAY MORNING,

DECEMBER 9, 1923, CLEVELAND.



JOSEPH T. KRAUS
Shorthand
Reporter
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There are many things which have contributed to man's belief in the hereafter. There is, first of all, man's natural fear of annihilation. Man does not like to think of himself as of coming to an end. We all wish to be in some measure perpetuated. Some are content to be perpetuated in their work and in their influence; others in their children; still others wish actual personal survival. But not every human being looks with shrinking of spirit at ultimate and final and absolute extinction. In fact, we cannot think of ourselves as non-existent. We have never experienced non-existence. When we think of death we are very much alive, and therefore the thought of death is, after all, an intellectual abstraction, as far as we ourselves are concerned.

I think it was Freud who said that the unconscious refuses to think of death. Our unconscious life, which is the life of our basic impulses, refuses to acknowledge death, and thinks of itself always as partaking of immortality, even when the intellect, the conscious life, thinks and speaks of death.

Then of course there is the fear of the unknown which makes men think of the hereafter. We see beloved ones pass on; we see their bodies who we knew to be informed with life and spirit and movement become cold and rigid, and confined to darkness and decay. But we know also that there was something in them that was more than body

and bone. We know of their spirit; we know of their personality; and we know of their mind, and we know of that aggregate which we call the soul; and when the body is lowered into the grave we ask ourselves: "Whither has the spirit gone? To what unknown land? To what far country has that something which to us and for us held all charm and grace and love, the spiritual essence of those whom we love,--whither has that vanished?"

And so our imagination, which is, after all, the last refuge and fortress of mortal man, peoples that land untrod by living man with fancies and dreams of a children of our wish and our hope.

Then, too, the sense of life's incompleteness makes men think of the hereafter. The span of our life, the three score years and ten, how brief that is. We are twenty years old before we pass out of the awkward, crawling, gaping stage of life. We are forty years old by the time we have made our mistakes and have learned a few things, and then when we are ready to begin really to live and to profit from our experiences and our accumulated knowledge, we must prepare for death; because the average life of man is less than forty years.

How incomplete life is. Then we see about us men who have not even reached the allotted time of three score years and ten, nor forty years. Youth cut down. Flowers that never had a chance to bloom but died in the bud. We see more especially struck down myriads of young men and

young women. All about us we see evidences of these broken arcs, these unfulfilled lives, these unfinished symphonies, and on the way the great pain, the realization, comes to us how tragically incomplete human life is. And how much more incomplete it is in the case of the man or the woman who has had some great ideal in life, a man who has labored, suffered perhaps, to achieve some fine and beautiful service for mankind. How few of such men and women realize their dreams. Many of them die before they reach the promised land.

And so the thought of life's incompleteness drives men to think at times of a hereafter. And also, I venture to say, an inborn rudimentary sense of justice. In our world, in the world of men, justice is a guiding principle,--in our world, which is incomplete, faulty, imperfect. Should it not also be a ruling principle in the life of the cosmos, in the life of the universe? Is the righteous man never to be rewarded? And is the wicked man never to be punished? Are both alike to share the same fate? Is the righteous man, who endured privation for the sake of truth, goodness and godliness, the same martyr, to suffer the same fate as the betrayer of men, the oppressor of men, the enemy of society? Are both to share the same grave and the same oblivion?

And so you see that the thought of the hereafter is not a vague entertainment of the human mind, but is a tragic need of human life. In the past, of course, when men knew less and imagined more the hereafter was oftentimes

pictured in very grotesque form. Man knew less of the laws of the universe. His conception of social values was not as high as it possibly is today. And so while he had the same need for a hereafter - because he loved life as much as we do, and grieved at the passing of a dear one as much as we do - he pictured the world to come in those fantastic forms borrowed from his limited knowledge of the world about him, and his limited conception of morality and ethics.

He divided the hereafter into two hemispheres, one above the earth and one below the earth; above, heaven, and below, hell; above, the place for the righteous; below, the place for the wicked; above, the blissful place for reward; below, the sad and gloomy place for punishment. He imagined that at the blowing of the great trumpet the dead will arise and put on their mortal bodies, even as a grain of wheat, after it decays in the ground in the winter, puts on its body anew in the spring; and that these risen dead will pass before the judgment throne, and there, according to their deserts, will they be assigned to the place of reward, heaven, or the place of punishment, hell. The body and the soul must together stand in judgment.

Jehuda Hanasi, says the Talmud, once told this parable to the Roman emperor: a man put two watchmen in his garden to care for it and guard it, but when the owner of the garden returned he found that much of the fruit of the garden had been stolen, and he called his two watchmen whom he had placed in the garden, one of whom was lame and the other was

blind; and he said to the lame man: "Did you steal of the fruit of this garden?" And the lame man said, "Why, how could I? I cannot walk." And he called to the blind man and said, "Did you steal of the fruit in the garden?" And he said, "How could I? I cannot see." And so the owner of the garden put the lame man on the shoulder of the blind man, and said, "In this manner did you steal from my garden?" The lame man used his eyes and guided the blind man.

And so, said Jehuda Hanasi, is it the case with the body and the soul; both alike must share in the guilt, and both together must stand in judgment.

And man's fervent imagination, unbridled and undisciplined by scientific knowledge, peopled this heaven with all the possible delights imagined by man, and peopled this hell with all the possible horrors imagined by man. In this heaven, said some of the earlier rabbis, the righteous shall feast at an eternal banquet table. They shall partake of the leviathan, the sea monster, and the land monster, and the gigantic birds. Mohammed pictured his paradise built of silver and gold and precious stones, in which the righteous and the faithful Mohammedans will recline on costly couches under the shade of trees, and very beautiful damsels waiting upon them. Men put into heaven all the material things which they desired and hankered after on earth and could not have. And of course for the sinners there was prepared a place in hell, a torture chamber, in which the diseased mind of man placed all the imaginable horrors in forms of torture--

roaring flames, and men standing up to their chin in pits of flaming sulphur, or burning oil, or molton metal. From his own experience or from his own imagination he borrowed all the paraphernalia of hell. A certain Tundale of the twelfth century, in his picture of hell, made a thief to pass over a bridge with spikes piercing through the planks of the bridge, and the thief would have to walk over this bridge. Well, he borrowed that picture from his own experience. Early in life he had the great misfortune of stealing a calf, and he was punished by the citizens of his town in just such a manner, and so he imagined that God must punish not in His way but in the way the citizens of his village punished him.

Even Dante, the flower of the Middle Ages,-- Dante, the spokesman of the orthodox religion of his day, could not refrain from putting into his inferno all these horrible means of torture.

And of course heaven was reserved for the faithful. Heaven belonged to those people who believed as you did. Everyone else had a reserved place in hell. Every creed took a monopoly on heaven and offered every other creed a monopoly of hell. Dante puts all heretics and all dissenters and all infidels into the particular terraces and compartments of his hell. Mohammed has the traditional seven departments in his hell, one lower than the other and one more terrible than the other; and in the first one he places the unfaithful Mohammedans, the disobedient

Mohammedans, and in the second compartment of hell, a little lower, he places the Jews, and in the third compartment of hell, a little lower, he places the Christians. At least, in his hell the Jew had it a shade the better.

Now, we have outgrown, of course, these conceptions and these ideas. We know now that there is no such a place as heaven or hell; because there is no above and there is no below. Our entire cosmic viewpoint is changed since the days of Copernicus. We know now the earth is not the center of the universe, and that the universe does not revolve around the earth. We know that above and below are only relative terms in space; that above us is empty space and below us is empty space, and at great distance from us there are revolving spheres and planets and perhaps other solar systems.

The entire conception of heaven and hell has passed from our mode of thinking. It has at best become a condition rather than a place; a spiritual quality rather than a physical location. But even long ago the sages of our people, the more advanced minds among the rabbis, the leaders of Israel, realized that the materialistic conception of heaven and hell is a faulty one and a childish one. R....., a rabbi of the third century, declares in the world to come there will be no eating, no drinking, no marriage, no giving in marriage, but the righteous shall sit with their crown upon their head and enjoy the effulgence of the spirit of God.

Even long ago the leaders of our people

realized that in heaven, at least, there can be no distinction between one creed and another, and between one religion and another; that no creed can take a monopoly upon heaven. And so they said, and it is remarkable that they did say so many centuries ago, the righteous among the Gentiles and the righteous among the heathens will partake in the world to come.

And then our entire conception of reward and punishment is changed. We no longer punish a criminal out of a sense of the spirit of vindictive or vengeance. We punish to correct and we punish to improve. And so the thought of eternal damnation, the eternal punishment, is horrible to our thinking today. And furthermore, the entire idea of reward and punishment we are come to look upon as childish. A child has to be bribed or threatened; a man does the right thing because it is the right thing to do.

Long ago a great rabbi, Antigonus of Socho, declared, "Be not like servants who serve their master for the sake of receiving a reward, but be like servants who serve their master without the expectation of a reward." And Ben Azzai, another great rabbi, declared, "The reward of a good deed is the good deed itself, and the reward of an evil deed, a sin, is sin itself."

And concerning one of the saints of the Catholic Church, this beautiful legend is told: that in one of his ecstasies he had a vision, and he beheld a stately woman carrying in one hand a pitcher of water, and in the

other hand a torch. With the one she was to put out the fires of hell, and with the other she was to set fire to Paradise. In other words, to destroy both the idea of punishment and the idea of reward as necessary to morality and to human conduct, and to place a higher ideal, a higher goal for human action. Goodness for goodness sake and not for the sake of reward.

What is our conception of the hereafter? What do we think of when we speak of the world to come? Well, when I think of the hereafter I think not of a place; I think of a condition in which my soul, the essence of my being, that which is really I - not my body, which is fashioned out of the dust and which will after a few years of time return unto the dust - but that which is myself, that which I am fashioning right through the years allotted to me, out of observation, out of experience, out of study, out of effort, out of my wish and my hope,--that that precipitate which I call my soul will continue; not necessarily in the state of absolute bliss, not necessarily in a state of absolute perfection, but that it will have the chance to continue its pilgrimage there as it is continuing its pilgrimage here, as it may have had in the past a pilgrimage then.

I believe in the continuity of life. I believe that life cannot be broken up into segments, born here and dying here. These are terms that we use because of our limited knowledge. There is no death, there is no cessation, there is no end to anything, whether it be matter or energy,

but all is a stream of life, changing, transforming, translating, evolving, but always continuous, always progressing, and without a break and without an end.

Can I prove this scientifically? No.

Science is not yet ready to prove my faith; and that is not surprising because science is not yet ready to prove things more concrete and more visible than this. It took the human race a million years to discover electricity. It may perhaps take them ten thousand or a million years more to establish this truth. Science today is confronted with a vast array of phenomena which it has as yet not organized and is as yet unable to explain. The entire realm of the psychic is a terra incognita almost, the unknown, undiscovered land, to science.

The whole subject of psychology, the whole subject of epistemology, the science of the soul and the science of the mind, are yet at their very beginning. Science knows of thought transference; science knows of telepathy; science knows of hypnotism; science knows of spiritualistic manifestations, but science is as yet unable to dogmatize upon it and to say, "Behold, we have solved the mystery!"

The attitude of the scientific mind, and properly so, is one of watchful waiting. And let me say that where science refuses to dogmatize, we laymen ought not to dogmatize. I believe that it is pitiful that so many are making a religion of spiritualistic manifestations--all these evidences of disembodied spirits and apparitions and levitation

and unaccountable knockings or rappings or tilting of tables. Such subjects belong to the scientific laboratory and not to the church. Such subjects should be studied, sifted and analyzed by a trained scientific mind and not by hysterical and emotionally moved men and women; and it is to my mind pathetic, and it is to my mind a degradation of the dead and of death when we resort to spiritualistic seances and when we seek communion with our dear departed through the pathetic media of dark rooms and shrieks and table rappings.

What possible good for our soul, for our life, can such things be except as they feed our morbidity and our childish curiosity? If we must commune with our dead, if at some time in our loneliness we feel the need and the cravings for the sound of a voice that is stilled, and the touch of a vanished hand, is it not better to commune with them in a quiet hour of meditation, to come to them athwart the bridge of memories, to recall all the beauty which was theirs, and all the meaning which they had for us? Is it not better thus quietly to dream of them, to think of them, and in so dreaming feel the touch of the vanished hand, than to resort to the unsatisfying and spiritually demoralizing intimations, physical manifestations of the spiritualistic artifice?

This much science does say: science does not deny the possibility of an after-life; science does not deny the possibility of immortality; and that is a tremendous concession. Science knows today that mind is not fashioned

out of matter and is not dependent upon matter. Science knows today that human thought is not created by brain cells. Science knows that the spirit of man is very much like a stream flowing through a channel: the channel holds the stream but the channel is not the stream; the stream has a reality and a life and an essence of its own. And so with the human mind which dwells in the brain; the brain holds the mind as a channel holds the stream, but the brain is not yet the mind; the mind has a reality and a life and an essence of its own, and the mind may continue to live and function by its own autonomy and by its own strength after its channel is broken and destroyed.

Science does say that all forms of energy are indestructible, that nothing is destroyed; not a drop of water, not a current of energy, not a gesture, not a movement, not an impulse is ever destroyed. And if a grain of sand cannot be annihilated, surely any human personality which moves mountains, which during its career on earth controls a whole organism, guides it, plans for it, thinks for it, provides for it,--surely such a sum, a store house, a battery of energy, can never be destroyed.

Science, then, while it does not prove immortality, does not disprove it or maintain that it is impossible. But there is another way of arriving at the belief in immortality, a way just as valuable as the scientific way, and that is the way of intuitive faith. When we are no longer in the realm of the knowable and the

ascertainable and the scientifically demonstrable, then our intuition and our faith have a right to postulate truth provided that truth is not contradicted by scientific knowledge.

I believe in God. I have in the past tried to tell you why I believe in God. My belief in God comes from my belief in immortality. I believe with the Psalmists: "Thou wilt not permit, thou in whom we have put our trust, though the all-wise and all-good God, thou wilt not permit thy faithful ones to see destruction." I think of God as of supreme mind, pure thought, rational in the highest, and therefore I believe that a rational being will not fashion human life through millions of years, endow man with qualities and attributes, inspire man to strive and seek and aspire, to become perfected, and then destroy and reduce him to corruption and dissolution.

My rational mind does not permit of such a contingency. No artist fashions a statue, and labors over it and agonizes over it and breathes his soul into it, chiseling away, polishing, fashioning it into his dream of perfection, and then after months and years of labor smashes it into bits. It does not sound reasonable to a human being; and after all, that is the only way we can think, as human beings.

I think of God as supreme goodness, because if God were not good the world could not exist. I cannot conceive of a supreme being, who has supreme goodness, that

would permit a human life, surcharged with hopes and dreams and longings, a human life which has, somehow, intimations, dream pictures of ultimate perfection.--I cannot think of a good God permitting that life, after a few years, to come to nothingness. It is not goodness; it would be mockery. And my God is a good god.

And so out of the experience of my life, out of the intimations of my experience, and out of my conception of the Supreme Being, I have arrived at a belief in immortality. I know no more except this belief. I cannot describe the states and the years to come after this body has seen corruption; I cannot, as a cartographer, plot this unknown land. All I believe is that my life, being of God, partakes of the quality of the indestructible, and as for everything else, I am content to wait in hope, in faith and in resignation; for God lives, and where God is there is goodness. He is in life, He will be in death--always the same.

And this thought of immortality makes me feel that I ought to try to make the here and the now worthy of the hereafter. If my life is to continue ascending through cycles of development, then surely I ought to make my life now worthy of such a continuity; I ought to try to bring the flavor and the spirit of immortality into my mortal days. I can do it. Man can do it. Man can partake of immortality during his days on earth by identifying himself with those things which partake of immortality. Goodness is immortal, and truth is immortal, and justice is immortal, and beauty is

immortal, and as I bring myself into touch and contact with these enduring and eternal qualities of the universe, and even in my few limited years, I share and taste immortality.

We can crowd immortality into one year, and one hour, and one moment; in fact, we live most not in terms of years; sometimes we live less in a decade than in one supreme hour of ecstasy and exultation. Duration has nothing to do with real living. And so here on earth man can imbibe, intake, something of the quality of immortality. We become eternal as we identify ourselves with that which is eternal.

The hereafter will not differ very much from the now and the here. It will be, if it is at all, a continuation. What we do now must inevitably, as the effect follows the cause, determine what we shall be in the hereafter. And so that the task of life is to prepare ourselves for the great adventure of death.

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