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The Value of Life, 1924.

RABBI ABBA HILLEL SILVER.

"THE VALUE OF LIFE."

THE TEMPLE, SUNDAY MORNING.

FEBRUARY 3, 1924, CLEVELAND.



AMERICAN JEWISH
ARCHIVES



JOSEPH T. KRAUS
Shorthand
Reporter
CLEVELAND

Last week in our discussion of the theme, the quest of God, we used for our text two poems of Jewish writers and one great poem of a Christian writer, and we discovered, if you will recall, the essential identity in tone, in content, in atmosphere, in imagery, of the writings of these men, separated by twenty-five hundred years, living in different parts of the world, of different races and different creeds.

This morning in discussing the theme, the value of life, I have selected the writings of a Jew and the writings of a Mohammedan, the two living approximately fifteen hundred years apart; the two belonging to different people, different races, different creeds; and as we go along you will discover here, too, the essential similarity in tone, in point of view, in content, oftentimes even in phraseology; and again this truth will be borne in upon us: that when men come face to face with ultimates, they ask the same questions, regardless of the place and time in which they live.

The anonymous author of the book called Ecclesiastes, or Koheleth, lived about three hundred years before the common era in Palestine. Omar the tent maker, the author of these quatrains we call the Rubaiyat, lived in Persia around the time of the First Crusade, which was the close of the eleventh century. Both authors, of course, belong to the Orient; and that fact is worthy of note,

because the imagery is typical; the imagery of the East-- the colorfulness and the richness, the sweep of imagination, that you find in both of these, Koheleth and the Rubaiyat, are typical of the temper and the temperament of the East.

Both writers ask the same question: Is life worth while? And both answer in the same way: Life is not worth while. They begin from the very same starting point, and end at the very same goal. Their starting point is what we sometimes call determinism; a simpler word is fate. Everything is predetermined. Life, the world, the universe, is controlled by inexorable, changeless, eternal laws or forces. Everything which is has to be, because it hath been so determined from the beginning of time; every effect can be traced back to a preceding cause, and that cause in turn to a yet earlier cause, and so on, to the very beginning of things. In this endless change of cause and effect there is no room whatsoever for initiative, for originality, for differentiation, for change. As Koheleth so very forcibly puts it: everything is predetermined--the time of birth, and the time of death, and the time of joy, and the time of sorrow, and the time of war, and the time of peace; everything was pre-ordained, and therefore what sense is there in working and in striving, in trying to do things differently, in trying to improve things; you can't improve things because you can't basically change anything. What value is there to human ambition? What is it you are striving for? What sense is there in having ambition when

you cannot make the slightest impress upon these heedless, blind, unseeing forces that sweep around you and through you, that hold you as in a vise, that grip you and play with you, as Koheleth says, like fish that are caught in a net.

Omar gives expression to the very same thought that Koheleth does. We are no other, he says, than a moving row of magic shadow-shapes, that come and go round with the sun-illumined lantern held in midnight by the Master of the show. We are just so many puppets; but helpless pieces of the game he plays upon this checker-board of nights and days. "Hither and thither moves, and mates, and slays, and one by one back in the closet lays." We are just so many pawns on the checker-board of fate. "The ball no question makes of ayes and noes, but right or left as strikes the player goes; and he that tossed you down into the field, He knows about it all--He knows--HE knows! The moving finger writes; and, having writ, moves on: nor all thy piety nor wit shall lure it back to cancel half a line, nor all thy tears wash out a word of it."

Starting, then, from this premise of determinism, the derivative follows which Koheleth so forcibly expresses: Life is not only predetermined, but it moves in a stupid, meaningless, purposeless cycle. If everything were predetermined and moved to a far off divine event, if everything were advancing and progressing to some higher, finer goal, then man could be satisfied, then life would have a zest and a meaning, because you are getting

somewhere.

But that is not true of life, says Koheleth. Round and round goes the wheel of life. All the rivers run into the sea, but the sea is never full; and to the place to which they go from there they will return back again. Everything moves but nothing changes; there is movement but no progress; there is fuss and fury and turbulence and effort and enterprise, but you get back just where you started, after all. And so life is one endless weariness; everything wearies, says Koheleth.

And from these two premises of cycle and predetermination comes this third conclusion: that man is no different; man is likewise caught up in this blind, never advancing process. Man has no preference; man has no superiority; man is like the beast of the field; man comes from the dust and returns unto the dust; all his hopes and all his triumphs and all his ambitions run down into the dust--the good and the wicked alike. There is no moral in government in the world at all; the grave the good and the wicked meet the same fate; there is no afterlife; the life of man ends with the grave.

I don't know of any poet who described with such deep pathos the fugitive character of life, the pitiful brevity of human life, as did this tent maker Omar; and I don't know of any who so ruthlessly described the fatefulness of human destiny as Koheleth did. "But all this I laid to my heart," he says, "even to make clear all this,

that the righteous and the wise, and their works, are in the hand of God; whether it be love or hatred, man knoweth it not all that is before them.

All things come alike to all men; there is but one event to the righteous and to the wicked; to the good and to the clean, and to the unclean; to him that sacrificeth, and to him that sacrificeth not; as is the good, so is the sinner; and he that sweareth, as he that feareth an oath.

This is an evil in all that is done under the sun, that there is one event unto all: yea, also the heart of the sons of men is full of evil, and madness is in their heart while they live, and after that they go to the dead.

For to him that is joined to all the living there is hope; for a living dog is better than a dead lion.

For the living know that they shall die, but the dead know not anything, neither have they any more a reward; for the memory of them is forgotten.

As well their love as their hatred and their envy, everything is long ago perished; neither have they any more a portion forever in any thing that is done under the sun."

And Omar expresses the same thought:

"For some we loved, the loveliest and the best, that from his vintage rolling time hath pressed, have drunk their cup a round or two before, and one by

one crept silently to rest. And we, that now make merry in the room they left, and summer dresses in new bloom, ourselves must we beneath the couch of earth descend, ourselves to make a couch--for whom? Ah, make the most of what we yet may spend, before we too into the dust descend. Dust unto dust, to lie, sans wine, sans song, sans singer, and--sans end!

Alike for those who for today prepare, and those that after a to-morrow stare, a Muezzin from the Tower of Darkness cries, 'Fools! your reward is neither here nor there!'"

And there is yet another conclusion which both these poets derived from their basic premises, and that is the utter futility of intellectual pursuits. If life is always the same, never changing; if life cannot be changed; if what is was, and what shall be already exists, what sense is there in troubling your mind to discover truth, to learn concerning the future? What value is there in the sweat of the mind when it leads nowhere?

And so Koheleth correctly says, "He who increaseth knowledge increaseth vexation of spirit." Knowledge was a sorry affair which God gave to man so that it might plague him, says Koheleth. It can't get him anywhere. And Omar, too, expresses the same thought when he says, "Myself when young did eagerly frequent doctor and saint, and heard great argument about it and about: but evermore came out by the same door as in I went. With them

the seed of wisdom did I sow, and with my own hand labored it to grow; and this was all the harvest that I reaped--
'I came like Water, and like Wind I go.'

That is all that knowledge could tell him.

There are perhaps two notes in Koheleth and in Omar which the one has and the other has not; and that is rather interesting. Nowhere in Omar do you find a complaint about the injustice in the world of men; the oppression of the poor by the rich. Omar complains about God's injustice to man, but never about man's injustice towards man. Koheleth the Jew, who has this sensitized soul for social justice and social equity, complains bitterly about "the tears of the oppressed." "But I returned, and considered all the oppressions that are done under the sun; and behold the tears of such as were oppressed, and they had no comforter; and on the side of their oppressors there was power; but the oppressed, they had no comforter.

Wherefore I praised the dead that are already dead more than the living that are yet alive.

But better than they both is he that hath not yet been born, who hath not seen the evil work that is done under the sun."

And there is a note in Omar which you do not find in Koheleth; a note of revolt, a note which approaches blasphemy. At all times Koheleth believes in God, even as Omar does. But for all that God meant to them in their

lives they may have been atheists. Their God was a God utterly abstract from the interests and the concerns of human life; their God was a God who had some tremendous beginning, created a universe and then lost all interest in it; ordained it for all time, and that was the end of it; a transcendent God but not an imminent God, not a God who lives with His children, suffers with them, creates with them, struggles with them. That God neither Koheleth nor Omar knew. And so Omar is often tempted to blaspheme. "You say there is a heaven and a hell; you say that I will be punished for my sins. But why should I be punished for my sins? God created me as I am, with all my evil inclinations. I have no choice; I have no free will. If I have sinned, if the pot is ugly and created all awry, why should I be blamed? I am just clay in His hand."

And so he says, "Oh, thou, who did'st with pitfall and with gin beset the road I was to wander in. Thou wilt not with predestined evil round enmesh, and then impute my fall to sin? Oh, thou, who man of baser earth did'st make, and even with Paradise devise the snake; for all the sin wherewith the face of man is blackened, man's forgiveness give--and take."

In other words, God should ask forgiveness of man for having created man as he is.

Now, both Omar and Koheleth having come to this blank wall, to this absolute negation, to this spirit

nihilism, what is the solution. What do they offer? What does the epicurism and materialism as expressed in both of these works, what do these philosophies offer to mankind? Why, only one thing, Omar says, "Ah, my beloved, fill the cup that clears today of past regrets and future years. Fill the cup. Tomorrow? Why, tomorrow I may be myself with yesterday's seven thousand years."

What does Koheleth say? "Eat, drink and be merry." But the Jew Koheleth is much more logical and consistent than the Mohammedan Omar. The Jewish rationalism does not permit him to stop there. You did not solve the problem by getting drunk. And so he devotes that marvelous Chapter II, which I read to you this morning, in giving a complete catalogue of all the pleasures that he sought to have in life--wealth, riches, palaces, power, pomp, singers--everything that life could offer him; he wine; pampered his flesh with, nothing that his eye wanted did he deny himself.

And then what? "Why, then I saw," says Koheleth, "that that, too, was vanity and the chasing after want." If wisdom cannot satisfy, if ideals cannot satisfy, then surely carnal pleasures, sensual delights, cannot satisfy. They may excite, they may stimulate, they may make us forget for the moment these harrowing problems about us,--the confusion and the doubts and the oppressions and the sins and the mysteries about us, but they cannot satisfy us; they cannot become a prop and a mainstay in life. "And so I

found that that, too," says Koheleth, "was vanity of vanities."

And so both, the prince, the aristocrat Koheleth, and the tent maker Omar, find themselves, after having followed this road in the valley of despair, lost. Now, you may well ask how comes it that such an irreligious book as Koheleth is included in this, the most religious collection of books in the world, the Bible. Isn't it strange that such thoughts should be canonized in that sacred writ? No, it is not strange at all. First of all, this mood of Koheleth and of Omar is an authentic mood in human life. Men do feel at times, if not always, the same question as Koheleth or Omar did; especially when we are old and the blood no longer seems fresh and vigorous through our veins, especially when men look back upon life and see the many failures and the many disillusionments and the many visitations that came to them during their few years on earth. Men sometimes do fall into this mood of pessimism and of despair; and every authentic mood finds expression in the Bible, and that is why the Bible is the most marvelous collection of writings in the world. Nothing that is native to the soul of man but what it finds some expression in this, the book of the ages, and because this mood is an authentic mood the book was very popular in ancient days.

The rabbis knew of a discussion about this book. The rabbis say that in the early days they tried to

keep the book of Koheleth out of the Bible. They wanted to declare the book of Koheleth as belonging outside the canonized books of the Bible. But they decided to include it. And why? And this is tremendously significant; and that is the thought that I would leave with you this morning. Why did they decide to include it. Because, say the rabbis, the beginning of the book has a sentence which sounds like authoritative doctrine, and the end of the book has a sentence which sounds like authoritative doctrine, and because of these two phrases and sentences, which sort of sandwich in all the revolt and all the denial and all the complaint that is found in the rest of the book, the book was permitted to remain.

And what are those two sentences? The one in the beginning of the book is, "What value is there in a man's life under the sun?" That is perfectly true, say the rabbis. If man's life is gauged only by its years under the sun, if the life of man ends with the setting of the sun, if the grave is the ultimate, the omega, the finale of a man's life, then there is no value to a man's life. "But man's life does not end with the grave." And so all these fugitive complaints of the man which you hear throughout the book are really irrelevant.

It is well for a man to complain; it is well for a man to give expression to these sporadic moods of his life, provided you remember at all times that all the inequalities and all the injustices which you see in this

world may only be links in a chain of perfect continuity; when this world is regarded as a link in an eternal life, the broken arc is only part of a completed circle, the discord which you see may, if you knew the complete theme of the symphony, be an essential part of the universal consonance and harmony of God.

And what is the concluding phrase of the book? say the rabbis. "The end of it all is after you have heard everything." The sum and substance of all that you have heard in this book is this: "Fear God, and keep His commandments; for this is the whole duty of man." That is authoritative teaching. Fear God and keep His commandments. God has constructed a moral universe; God has constructed a universe which is purposeful. You may not know the purpose of it, because your mind is finite and your powers are limited and your grasp is small; but He who is infinite, all-wise and almighty, created a universe which would not exist if it were not a moral universe. God dwells within humanity, in His commandments, in His ethical teachings, in His moral postulates, in the consciousness of man, in man's aspirations, in man's moral ambitions, in man's spiritual yearning, in the struggle of the human soul for the higher level and the purer air, in man's incessant yearning to rise,--there God lives.

"This is the whole of man." And the rabbis wisely interpret this phrase to mean, "All this world was created for man." All of it was created for man. Man is

not a grain of sand upon the seashore; man is not an infinitesimal, insignificant speck in the universe. The whole universe lives for him, because he is not alone made in the image of God, but he is a co-worker of God. He is divine because of the divine creativeness which resides in his spirit. Physically, as far as our bodies are concerned, we are subject to these immutable laws of the physical world; the laws of growth and decay, of life and death; physically, we come from the dust and go to the dust, and there is no preference to man over the beast--physically.

Ah, but man is more than the mud out of which he was fashioned. God breathed in him "the soul of life," or the living soul. God made not his body, not that poor, tired mass which is subject to all the accidents of time and place, to disease, to old age, not that, but the spirit of him which is made in the image of God--that surmounts life's transitoriness, that rises above the fugitive character of our mortal days, that abides long after our poor and tired bodies have sought and found the peace and quiet of the grave.

In us there has been put a spiritual something, a spiritual essence, which, coming from divinity, partakes of divinity and makes for the divine in human life. That Koheleth failed to understand, and that Omar failed to understand. The dignity of life comes to one only when he recognizes that he is "a co-partner with God" in the works of creation. Ecclesiastes and Omar were profound

but not profound enough. They sought to found the meaning and the purpose of life in pleasure and in pain; that which was undesirable was pain, and that which was desirable was pleasure; and the highest goal--life--was pleasure, and when pleasure palled, as pleasure must pall - "I hated life." Ah, but the goal of life and the meaning of life and the beauty and glory of life cannot be found in pleasure; nor is the real tragedy of life found in pain; the beauty and the glory and the zest of life are to be found in hopes, in ideals - not in achievements, not in having and not in holding and not in pampering our bodies with wine, and not in giving our eyes everything they crave for.

The beauty of life is in aspiring, in reaching up and out to the higher levels, in linking our souls to some tremendous loyalty, in consecrating ourselves to some vast and noble ideal. It matters not whether that ideal is real or not; it matters not whether we can realize that ideal or not; it matters not whether this world is coming to an end a thousand years from today; it matters not whether the whole human race will be wiped off this earth some day, and that not even a memory remain of what once was this struggling and enterprising race,--it is not the success of an ideal which determines its value; its value is to be found in the effort to achieve it, in the struggle to make it real; happiness is to be found in doing the worthwhile thing and in doing it well. That neither Omar nor Koheleth knew. They sought satisfaction in tangible things.

"I want to live forever, and if I can't, I am unhappy. I want to be absolutely healthy and strong, and if I can't be that, why, life is worthless. I want to gain the objective of everything I try to think about, and if I can't realize my goal immediately, then it is valueless."

They were materialists; they were trafficking with life; they were bartering with life. They were not of those "blessed that are," who do not ask anything of life but who always give, and only as you give of your soul and of your mind and of your devotion to your fellowmen, to your God, only as you give through ideals and through aspirations, do you live the life of beatitude and the life of absolute contentment of spirit.

Man is immortal because of his hopes; man is Godly because of his ideals; man can stand at the brink of a grave and not give way to the pain of his soul, provided he has with him at all times the faith--the faith. It is not the fact, it is not a verifiable, provable fact of essence: it is the faith, provided he has with him the faith, that he belongs to an endless process of evolution, to an endless ascendancy, and that he helps through the exertions of his mind and his soul to widen the road between himself and the jungle, and lessen the road between himself and God; provided that he feels that his hands are helping to build kingdom come--the world of tomorrow.

That is why the book was included in the Bible; because the author or the editor of the book came to

the conclusion after trying everything else, and wandering upon every by-way, returning to the highway of Jewish idealism.

"The end of the matter is reverence God; obey His commandments." Live the life of fine instincts and fine impulses of morality. "For what you see about you, all of you, was created so that you may grow and develop and rise."

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