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Fear, 1924.

"FEAR."

RABBI ABBA HILLEL SILVER.

THE TEMPLE, SUNDAY MORNING.

MARCH 16, 1924, CLEVELAND, O.



I wish to speak this morning of fear; not from the psychological point of view, as one of the primary and livliest instincts of the human race, nor from the pathological point of view, as one of the chief sources of the maladies of the mind, of spiritual and mental abberations; I want to speak of fear principally from the moral point of view as a determining factor in our conduct, in our social relationships.

Fear is, of course, as you know, a sensation experienced by all living things. The animals are subject to the attacks of fear just as much and perhaps more than man. Fear is one of the most vivid, one of the most compelling, and one of the earliest emotional experiences of man. Perhaps the earliest experiences of an infant are those of fear. Infants are afraid of objects and of situations long before they have learned why these objects and these situations should be feared, long before they have had experience and contact with these objects and these situations, so as to be justified in their fear of them.

The human race seems to inherit a certain crude, primitive fear. Infants are afraid of loud and sudden noises, of strange people, of animals, of being left alone, of darkness. And fear abides with man right through his life; it is not always intense, and it is not always morbid fear; but all men do experience fear. There are very few

people who are not afraid of, who do not shudder almost instinctively at some violent crash coming unexpectedly upon them, and the loud and dismal howling of the wind at night, at being left alone in a dark, unknown place, at finding oneself, for example, alone at midnight in a cemetery--of all places the safest place. There are very few people whose blood does not curdle when listening to stories of ghosts. We are all more or less afraid. Some of us are afraid of open spaces, and some of us are afraid of closed spaces; some of us are afraid of high altitudes; others are afraid of cats and dogs. You and I know that perfectly well and strong and able-bodied women are terrified at the sight of a perfectly harmless little mouse. Most men are still afraid of signs and omens. We call them superstitions, but they are dreads. Some men are afraid of the number thirteen. All of us are more or less afraid of the hereafter.

We all have our fears. Of course the source and origin of these fears date back to the dim, distant days, to the ancestral life of the race. The experiences of man during the numberless cycles of development from the ape man to the modern man, and even his experiences in the infra-human existence, when he was even lower than the ape,--these experiences, I say, of man in the jungle and in the open, as a cannibal, as a savage, as a barbarian, as a hunter,--his bitter struggle for survival, his struggle against Nature, his struggle against beasts, his experiences with the dangers

that lurked in dark places, in caves, in caverns at night,-- all these experiences, covering myriads of years, and perhaps myriads of generations, have left with us in our sub-conscious self a rich , a dark but an abundant deposit of certain instinctive reactions, of habitual reactions, to certain definite stimuli. However cultured and educated we may be, these sudden stimuli, attacking us from without, catch us unaware and bring up these instinctive reactions that are within us.

I suppose in the early days fear had a definite purpose in human life. Fear may have had a useful purpose. Fear in the life of the primitive man put him on his guard; fear warned him to flee from danger, and fear prepared him for defense. It has been lately established, for example, that fear has definite physical and chemical reactions in an organism. When you are frightened there is a discharge, a greater discharge of adrenalin from the glands which stimulate your nervous system; more sugar is poured into the blood, which creates additional energy. The blood is, furthermore, drained from your skin and your digestive organs and is poured into your brain and into your muscles, where the blood is needed for defense.

In other words, fear prepares a man for self-defense; it makes him ready for the combat. And so fear in the ancient days may have had a definite utilitarian purpose, but in civilized life today, where fears are less real than imagination, where the conditions of life

are so different from what they were in the jungle, fear has largely lost its useful purposes and has become a harmful and destroying thing in human life. Fear has now become largely a disease, which must be cured or it will destroy man.

There is no human emotion that so inhibits conduct as fear. In extreme cases fear will paralyze a man. A man will lose his power of speech, his sight, his power of motion, when attacked by an overwhelming dread; he will absolutely succumb to fear. And then of course in this weakness man is like the animal. There are animals who lose complete control over their muscles, who are deprived of the possibility of escape or defense by an overpowering dread. Birds become petrified into immobility at the sight or sound of deadly snakes; a horse, on seeing a tiger, will no longer be able to run away and escape; and it is a common experience, of course, for a man to be (when we use that phrase) petrified by sudden dread or fear. And sometimes fear kills. We speak of being "scared to death." And that is, in many instances, literally true. Men have been frightened to death by a sudden, violent fear; they have been killed.

Now, in less intense forms fear will make cowards of men. Fear will urge men to flight, to shrinking, to hiding oneself; fear will demoralize our lives, our principles, the whole balance of our being; fear makes men cruel, because the cruel man at heart is a coward and afraid

of the man whom he is victimizing; fear makes men misers because the miser is afraid of poverty; fear makes men superstitious; the superstitious man is afraid of the unknown, of the thing which he does not understand or comprehend; fear makes for worry--that thing that undermines ultimately our nervous constitution; fear makes for suspicion, for distrust, for instability of character; fear poisons the very mainsprings of human life.

Now, knowing fear to be what it is, is it not surprising that men, instead of endeavoring to nullify or modify it, instead of endeavoring to destroy these fearful memories of the past, which cling like poisonous ivy around the lives and minds or imaginations of men,--that we foster it unconsciously in many ways; we foster these ancient dreads of the race unconsciously in the nursery; we crowd the minds of babes and little children with stories--to us perfectly harmless stories, of witches and wizards and goblins and giants and dark forests and vague dreads, which cling to the mind of the child, to his vivid imagination, and remain with him long after he has left the period of childhood.

We employ, because it is the easiest and readiest method, fear in the education of children. We threaten with dire visitations any infringement upon our will, any waywardness on the part of the child. This method of fear in pedagogy seems to be the easiest, but in reality it is the unfairest and the least effective of all in the training of character and in developing men and women into

fine manhood and womanhood.

Religion has done the self-same thing.

Religion has not been able to resist the temptation of making men good by frightening them, and religion from days immemorial has preached fear unto men--the fear of God, the fear of death, the fear of the hereafter; and this immemorial propaganda fear has given to the human race, up to comparatively recent times, what I call spiritual goose flesh. We enter our churches and our cathedrals in dread. We pray not because we want to pray, because there is an urge in us to reach up to the celestial spheres and commune with a loving Deity; we pray not to be better and finer, but we pray because we are afraid, lest an excitable Deity be offended in our neglect of him. And we are good, we avoid sin not because we want our lives to be glorified and exalted, because we feel that sin will degrade us, but because we are afraid of the consequences of sin in the hereafter.

Now, it is my belief that if man is ever to come into his high estate, if man is ever to live the life resplendent, if man is ever to become just a little lower than the angels--and he has it in him to become just a little lower than the angels--then man must conquer fear! Man must not suppress fear, man must not deny fear, because in suppressing it and denying it he is just driving it underground, there to fester and unnerve and destroy him.

Man must learn to recognize that fear is; it

exists; it is a common experience of the human race; it attacks us all at some time or other. But he must learn to recognize it for what it is--a survival, a throw-back, an emotion. The difference between the brave man and the coward is not that the brave man never fears. That is folly. There isn't a man who does not fear. But the brave man sees his fear, knows it for what it is, holds on to his resolution, and is determined until he loses his fear in the intensity of action.

You take soldiers; every soldier is afraid before a battle. He may be nonchalant; he may be whistling, but he is whistling to keep up courage; he may be joking, but he is merely relieving himself of his intense emotion in so doing. He is afraid. But the brave soldier will see his fear and know it to be fear and overcome it until he plunges into battle, and then he loses all his fear in the heat and the excitement of action; but the weakling will see his fear and become afraid of his fear and shrink from action.

Man must conquer fear if he is ever to be himself; and man can be helped to conquer fear if from earliest childhood his mind would be directed not to those strange survivals of the past, not to imagination--imps and goblins and satans and giants, but to those things which strengthen character and build confidence and self-reliance into a man. Men can be helped in their tremendous job to destroy fear in them, if at every stage of a man's life from earliest childhood, he would be shown the ground of his fear

and the groundlessness of his fear; if he were shown the real cause of that which petrifies him, if the fear were exposed and laid bare to him, if the truth were imparted to him.

"Ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free."

And man can be helped in his work to conquer fear by religion. If religion will surrender its primitive ideology, if religion would surrender its paraphernalia of the archaic days--its dreads, its mystic rituals, its threats of reward and punishment, its devils and satans and hells, and teach and preach a God of love, really, a companion, a friend, a helpmate to man, then man would gain more confidence.

If religion instead of emphasizing, as it has done heretofore, man's insignificance, man's weakness, the brevity of man's days, the certitude of death, the inevitableness of retribution, if religion would begin to emphasize the significance of man; the divinity of man, the strength of man, the infinitude of every one of his hours and moments of life, the certainty of immortality and deathlessness, and the inevitableness of divine compassion, of forgiveness, of love, why, man would gain in self-reliance, in a sense of self-confidence and self-sufficiency, in dignity.

Confidence! Why, you know it is a common thing to observe that a patient who is confident of recovery is half recovered. You know that confidence in a physician is half a cure; you know that confidence in the curative power of even an idol, an image, a rock, will cure men. One

of the great pathologists of Italy makes this remarkable observation: "The history of medicine is full of the marvelous effects of confidence. If we were to cite all the examples of hysterical women, nerves, melancholia, paralytic men, who on the simple word of a physician, through faith in the efficacy of some remedy, have taken courage and recovered, we should see that every day wonders and miracles worthy of the saints are performed."

Now, if this is true of physical ailments, if men and women can actually be cured of physical diseases through a powerful confidence and a mighty faith in whatever it may be, then surely all our moral ailments and our spiritual diseases can be cured through a similar moral and spiritual faith and conviction. And this is what religion ought to do for mankind. Religion ought to give--and if it fails to give that it fails in almost everything it sets out to accomplish.--religion ought to give to men beset by primordial fears and dreads, the uncertainties and doubts and perplexities of life, beset by enemies all about him and within him,--religion ought to give to that man a strength and confidence and faith which will enable him to override and subdue these inherited or experienced dreads.

The mission of religion is not to cower and intimidate people by threats of the now and the hereafter; the mission of religion is not to drive men down to their knees cowering and timorous before the wrath of a punitive Deity, who does not allow any contravention of his will, and who

visits with the cruelest, unspeakable torments of a hell the sinner and the wayward man. That is not the mission of religion at all. The mission of religion is to liberate the human mind of these inherited or experienced fears; the mission of religion is to enable a man to say, and say fortunately and exaltingly: "The Lord is my light and my salvation. Of whom need I be afraid? The Lord is the strength of my life. Of whom need I be in fear?" That is the mission of religion.

If a man is afraid of old age; if a man feels that his faculties are growing weaker, and the tide of his life is ebbing, and he grows afraid, it is the function of religion to step in and say to that man: "Fear not, I am with thee." Old age and youth, they are just moments in your eternal pilgrimage. Old age may be richer because of its fuller experiences, and may be nobler and finer; with the decline of our physical robustness our spiritual self may be exalted and refined. "Fear not, for I am with thee."

And when men are afraid of death, of the dissolution and the decay of the body, religion should step in and say, and help a man to say, "Yea, even when I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for thou art with me. Thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me." There is no death! Nothing ever dies, nothing is ever destroyed. God is life. And we who are made in the image of God partake of his eternity and of his deathlessness. That is true religion.

When men are afraid of failure, when men are afraid to undertake a new great enterprise because they fear failure and disappointment, and they are content to remain with their little aim and their little purpose and their mean ambition, because they have not the courage, religion steps in and says, "Go up and conquer, for I am with thee!" And when mankind is afraid of progress because progress is an adventure into the unknown, because progress is a break with the past and the known, when men are afraid of new ideas, religion must step in and say, "Fear not!"

Life is an endless process of change. Nothing ever remains, nothing is ever permanent, nothing is ever fixed. It is one vast sea of flux and move and change, and beneath those tides are the everlasting arms of God. They change because there is a changeless, an immutable Deity, whose purpose abides, whose plan endures. Fear not! God underwrites the efforts and the struggles and the adventures of mankind.

I think when religion assumes that mission men will be happier and freer. Disease--that is what fear is. Professor Mosseau said this: "Let us remember that fear is a disease to be cured. The brave man may fail sometimes, but the coward fails always." Fear is a disease to be cured. We can live our lives without fear if we train ourselves, first, into physical robustness, and, secondly, into mental and moral hardihood and robustness. We can conquer this deadliest foe of mankind--fear!