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Prophecy - the People's protest, 1926.

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"PROPHECY--THE PEOPLE'S PROTEST

RABBI ABBA HILLEL SILVER.

THE TEMPLE, SUNDAY MORNING.

JANUARY 24, 1926, CLEVELAND, O.

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JOSEPH T. KRAUS  
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There have been four great tendencies in Jewish life right through the ages: the one is prophecy or prophetism; the other is legalism; the third is mysticism, and the last is nationalism. During the next few weeks I hope to discuss with you these four major trends or tendencies in Jewish life, the four principal motifs of our people's spiritual existence. They represent the four strands which have been interwoven into one cord, or rather the four streams which have poured into the one river of the people's spiritual life.

There were times when one or the other of these motifs were dominant, but there was no time when any one of them was completely absent. At times one fought against the other; there was conflict among them for supremacy in Jewish life, and the record of this conflict, the story of these struggles and the subsequent adjustments constitute the history of Judaism down the ages. For while, friends, we speak of Judaism as one religion and Israel as one people, we ought to bear in mind that they are one only as a human being is one--one but constantly changing.

A human being, a personality, has a period of infancy which differs radically from the period of adolescence, and that period differs from the period of manhood, and that in turn from the period of old age. Man in his span of life undergoes radical changes--biologic, physical, mental, psychic. Now there is, of course, in the



life of every human being a sub-stratum which we call the self, the ego, upon which all these changes act. There is the ego which acts like a string upon which all the pearls are strung, like the clay out of which the artist moulds his figure, but that self is constantly being worked upon, acted upon by forces external and by forces internal. And it is so with a people and it is so with a religion.

Judaism is not a formal summary of theologic notions; it is not a system of creeds or doctrines only; it is a living organism; it is a growing, an evolving organism; it is the whole spiritual experience of the race down through three thousand years. That spirit through these centuries ceaselessly adventuring, experimented with and tried new ideas, new adjustments, acted upon other cultures, received impressions from other cultures, and that is the Judaism which we have today.

Now prophecy is the most important of these four tendencies in Jewish life, even as it is the most important contribution which Israel made to civilization. It is not the only one, mind you; the other three are equally important. Without the other three--legalism, mysticism, nationalism--the messay of the prophets may have remained an irrelevant abstraction--a thing without locality, without place in life, and without these other three Israel may never have survived to carry on these ideals enunciated by the prophets. But prophecy, nevertheless, remains the most exalted creation of the genius of our race, even as it



continues to remain our greatest benefaction, our greatest gift to mankind.

Now what is prophecy? I called it the people's protest. That is rather inadequate. Prophecy is the cry of the best that is in a people's life against the worst. It is the yearning in the people's soul for what ought to be in the midst of what is. Prophecy is the faith of a people in the perfectability of human life, individual and social, and its magnificent impatience with everything that retards the fulfillment of that hope.

Prophecy sought to teach the people that all the existing iniquities of the time--oppression, poverty, slavery, hate, war--are not necessary, are not inherent in the nature of God's world, are not indispensable, are not inevitably, but that they are the result of human blindness and stupidity and obstinacy; that man can by dint of righteousness and love arrogate all that is wicked and hateful and ugly in his social and in his individual life.

Prophecy, then, is the cry of progress against tradition; the call of the future against the clamor and the insistence of the past and the present. It is the glowing hope of the human race for better times and happier times.

Now what was the prophet? The prophet was the spokesman of these ideals; he was their mouthpiece. The prophet was not a soothsayer; the prophet was not a fortune teller; the prophet did not concern himself with



what shall be but with what ought to be. The prophet did not look upon himself as the originator, the inventor of these ideals of human perfection, but rather as the channel through which they poured out of their eternal source in God into the social consciousness. The prophets were obsessed by their visions; they became their slaves; these visions of a reconstructed humanity, of an ideal state and an ideal people and an ideal man took complete possession of their lives, intellectual and emotional lives. Sometimes they raised them to the highest pitch of ecstasy and divine frenzy. They were completely mastered by their vision; their vision was like a raging fire within them.

Now the prophets were not professionals; they were, as a rule, laymen,--shepherds, tradesmen, merchants. It is well to remember even in our own day, when most Jewish laymen have relegated Judaism to the Rabbis, that Judaism is the creation of the Jewish laymen, even as the synagogue is the product of the mind and the efforts and the pieties and the devotion of the Jewish laity, not of Jewish ecclesiastics. The prophets were just ordinary people, not trained to prophecy, not schooled in the technique of prophecy, but performing each his daily labor, his task in life, and suddenly the idea seized hold of them; the Word of God, as they put it, came to them; a mighty conviction overwhelmed them with such impetuosity, with such driving force, that they had to forsake their home, their trade, their business, their kith and their kin,



and above all their peace of mind and soul. For the destiny of the prophet was a tragic destiny; he had to forsake them all and go to the market places, to the gathering places of their people and proclaim the word which was given them to proclaim. The prophets would appear suddenly in a city or in a town, unheralded, unannounced, usually on the occasion of a great national crisis, and they would speak their word, their message, challenging, arresting, sometimes frightful in its foreboding, and then as quickly disappear into the unknown. They would never disappear until they had announced, in the midst of the taunting and the jeer and the mockery and the hate of the auditor, those messages which were destined to revolutionize the spiritual life of mankind. And the prophets used every conceivable device, rhetorical and otherwise, to bring home their message. They scolded, they cursed, they exalted, they pleaded, they begged with the people; they used all conceivable figures of speech--the metaphor and the synonym and the hyperbole, poetry and prose, the dirge, the chant, the ode,--every conceivable form of speech and every conceivable symbolic act, in order to bring home more vividly to the eyes and to the minds of the people those ideas which were stirring in their souls, crying for expression.

They were men possessed of a message. What was their message? They all had one message. Their styles were different; their theme was one. The Rabbis already observed it when they said: "One theme was given to all the



prophets, but there were no two prophets who prophesied in the same way." Their emphases differed; differed first because of the difference of conditions of the times in which the respective prophets uttered their messages; differed also because of the peculiarities of temperament, of experience of the individual prophet. They were human and therefore they did not all possess in the same measure gifts of imagery, gifts of expression, keenness of insight, profoundness of thought. They differed. As the Rabbis truthfully say: "God gave the holy spirit unto the prophets, each man according to his strength." But the urge which drove them all to prophecy was one and the same: they all wished "to improve the world after the pattern of the kingdom of God"; to make that which is crooked straight, and to establish universal justice and righteousness upon the earth.

What was their message? They spoke first of all of God, one and spiritual. They flouted, they denounced, they scoffed at all the religious systems of their day, of all peoples which posited many gods of physical attributes. They called those idols and gods . . . nothing. The prophets killed idolatry forever. They were the men who operated that system of theologic thinking which held the minds of mankind enslaved for thousands of generations and not of years. They destroyed idolatry forever. They spoke of one God whose essence was spirit, whose attributes were justice and love, whose dominion was forever and over all. They spoke of a God who was at the same time the stern



judge and the loving father; they spoke of a God who is near and indwelling "in the universe" and in the life of every human being; and twenty-five hundred years of spiritual activity on the part of the human race has not added one indispensable phrase to that conception of God which was first pronounced by the prophets of Israel on the hills of Judea and in the cities of Samaria. That was the final,-- a spirit God-idea which mankind treasured to this day; and that was the message of the prophets of Israel.

The prophets detached religion from cult and shrine; disassociated religion from priestcraft and temple and sacrifices; they knew how readily ritual obscures true faith, and so they stripped the ritual of their day, which was mainly one of sacrifices,--they stripped it of its sacrosanct character; they mocked at the people, they ridiculed the people for the sublime faith which they put in institutions, in buildings, in cults, in sanctuaries. They asked for a faith which was an inner faith, a faith of conduct, practices, deeds, of morality and ethics rather than a formal external ritualism. They maintained that ceremonies and symbols are good but that they are not an end in themselves; they are at best just aids to memory, pedagogic helps but not religion per se; they are not the end of religion.

And the prophets for the first time in the history of civilization identified religion with morality, faith with conduct. They maintained that morality has its sanction in faith, and that faith has its objective in



conduct. They maintained that God is a God of goodness, and therefore that he can be worshipped only through goodness; they maintained that God is a moral being and therefore the way to him is the moral way; they insisted that the way to worship God is not by cult and ritual or by the bringing of burnt offerings and vain oblations or the celebration of festivals merely, but through justice and love and humility and suffering,--these are the ways of worshipping God.

And they gave a code of morals to mankind in which justice and love are the dominant notes. Neither must exclude the other; one must correct the other. Judaism is based just as much on the fundamental doctrine of justice as it is on the ideal of love. One supplements the other, but one cannot supplant the other. It is folly to think that Judaism is a religion of rigid legalism, of vindictive justice, and that Israel taught mankind a God of vindictiveness and vengeance. Not at all. Israel, whose genius was idealistic and at the same time supremely practical and realistic, gave to mankind a conception of God who demands first and foremost righteousness, justice,--not to be the root, the basis of all social and individual existence, but over and above it, supplementing it, crowning it, its fragrance, its aroma, its charm and its grace, is the ideal of compassion, kindness, mercy and love. "Thou hast been told, O man, what is good and what the Lord doth require of thee: to do justly" - that is first, that is primary--to do



justly - then: "to love mercy and to walk humbly with thy God."

The prophets in giving this code of morals to mankind also insisted on this: that the essence of human life is spiritual; that the goal of human life is spiritual; that the greatest good in human life is spiritual; that the spiritual values are the things which alone give grandeur and sublimity to human existence. "Let not the rich man glory in his riches, let not the powerful man glory in his might, let not the learned man glory in his learning, but let him who wishes to glory, glory in this: that he understands and knows Me;" that he understands and knows and pursues the things of the spirit which are the essence of human life.

Lastly, the prophet, my friends, taught men social responsibility. "I am my brother's keeper." The poor man, said the prophets, is your brother. The oppressed and the denied and the dispossessed is your brother; the widow and the orphan are the widows and the orphans of your brother. They are your wards; the responsibility is directly yours. They may be the victims of your negligence or indifference or sense of irresponsibility, directly or indirectly. It is your duty to look after their well-being when they are brought to your charge and your door. Nay, more, it is your duty to strive so to reconstruct the social and the economic and the political life so as to make such conditions impossible. You are your brother's keeper.



And the prophets wielded a whip of scorpions, a rod of anger against all the exploiters of mankind. They denounced the oppressor; they denounced the idle rich, the men who dwelt at ease in Zion while there is poverty and misery in the land. The profiteer, the usurer, the hypocrite, the cheat,--they denounced them with burning bitterness, hate and scorn, as they had never been denounced before or since. Even as they were harsh upon the malefactors of society, so were they kindly, a healing balm, to the humble, the beaten and the bruised of life.

And this sense, friends, of social solidarity, of the responsibility of each for each which the prophets taught, soon led them to transcend their national boundaries and to reach out and to include within their encompassing sympathies the whole of mankind. The prophets were the first universalists of the world. When other peoples were looking upon the stranger as the enemy, as the barbarian, the prophets taught Israel to open up the doors of its heart and let the whole world enter as brother and friend. "For have we not all one Father? Hath not one God created us all? Why then should we deal treacherously one with another?" If God is a universal God, then our sympathies must be broad enough to include, to embrace all of God's children.

As a result of that conviction the prophets were the first to preach peace unto the nations of the world. When the world was steeped in militarism, as it is to this day; when religion sanctioned war and glorified heroes; when



the armies would march to the temples, there to receive their consecration and their blessing, the prophets of Israel projected a vision into the world, a vision of disarmament, a vision of the time when men will break their swords and turn them into plowshares, and break their spears and turn them into pruning hooks.

The prophets dreamt of the day of international reconciliation and international law, when all the nations of the earth will stream to Zion, as they are now hesitatingly streaming to Geneva, there to learn the law of righteousness, which the prophets called the law of God. That, too, that vision of international peace came out of the burning soul, the prophetic hunger of the seers of Israel. And the prophets of Israel gave to us Jews our mission in life. They were the first to define the philosophy of our history; they were the first to give us a destiny worthwhile, of living and suffering for. We shall speak of that again when we come to discuss the fourth of the great tendencies in Jewish life--nationalism.

They announced 2700 years ago that the destiny of the people of Israel is to be not mere survival nor conquest nor political power nor territorial aggrandizement: the destiny of the people of Israel was to be a career of universal service and leadership. A nation, like an individual, must apply its endowments, its corporate will, not to selfish purposes but to the high purposes of mankind. Israel's destiny was to be "a light unto the nations" --to



bring the imprisoned out of the prison house, and he who dwells in darkness out of the great darkness and into the great light. That was to be the heroic career of Israel, and that has been our career, checkered with suffering and martyrdom and wanderings and misery.

The prophet placed upon us that burden, that crown, that cross, and the prophet thereby gave us our immortality. The time soon came when prophecy ceased in Israel. Prophecy had its flowering period in the seventh and in the eighth centuries before the common era, in Isaiah, in Jeremiah, in Amos, in Hosea, in Micah; but after the first exile, the Babylonian exile, prophecy ceased, because the people was no longer free, and freedom is at the root of spiritual autonomy, and spiritual autonomy is at the root, at the very heart of prophecy. The prophets prophesied because they were free men, because in them there pulsed a spirit of independence; they were responsible to none but God; they spoke for none but God; they did not care for the restrictions and the inhibitions of customs, of conventions, of traditions, of institutions; they received direct revelations from God; they were free men, but exile soon restricted the sense of freedom of our race. Exile taught us to know suppression and inhibition and repression; and so the Rabbis truly say that after the Babylonian exile prophecy ceased in Israel, and from that time only the . . . ego--not the loving word itself in the direct and immediate revelation but merely the ego was



allotted to the portion of our people, and in the course of time even that ego grows faint and disappears, to assert itself later on in our great career in the exile.

But Israel ceased to prophesy. Israel, as we shall see during our forthcoming lectures, never turned its back upon the ideals that the prophets announced, and perhaps our greatest contribution to mankind in the last two thousand years has been our steadfastness, our persistent loyalty in the midst of suffering, in the midst of the accumulated hate of the world, a hate tending to break our will.--our persistent loyalty and devotion to these ideals of the prophets--the ideal of God one and spiritual, the ideal of religion as co-terminus with continuing morality, the ideal of social responsibility, the ideal of Israel as a priest people, carrying across the burning sands of adversity in the ark of the Covenant of the Lord, these eternal ideals which were first voiced by the seers of our people "on the hills of Judea and in the cities of Samaria."

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