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Mysticism - the higher quest for God, 1926.

"MYSTICISM--  
THE HIGHER QUEST FOR GOD."

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JOSEPH T. KRAUS  
SHORTHAND REPORTING  
ENGINEERS BUILDING  
CLEVELAND, O.



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"MYSTICISM--THE HIGHER QUEST FOR GOD."

RABBI ABBA HILLEL SILVER.

THE TEMPLE, SUNDAY MORNING.

FEBRUARY 7, 1926. CLEVELAND, O.

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JOSEPH T. KRAUS  
Shorthand  
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CLEVELAND



Just as Israel had its prophets and its law-givers, it also had its mystics, and mysticism is as an authentic tendency in Jewish life as prophecy and as legalism. One finds a strong element of mysticism in prophecy, and from there it passes over into the literature of the psalm; it appears again as a theosophy in the apocalyptic literature following the Bible. One finds it expressed in the Talmud where the whole subject matter, in fact, of both speculative and practical theosophy is already indicated, though not systematized or developed. One sees it in the Hellenic-Jewish literature, such as that of Philo; it appears again in the period of the Gaonim in Babylonia; it receives a setback during the philosophic period culminating in Maimonides, only to reach its classic expression in medieval Jewish cabala in the thirteenth and the fourteenth centuries. A little later on it degenerates into that miracle mongering, superstitious, practical cabala of the sixteenth century, whose center and stronghold was the city of Safed in Palestine; and it reappears again as a life-giving, health-giving movement in Chasanim<sup>QSM</sup> in the eighteenth century.

So that Jewish mysticism has today a rather checkered career; but its very persistency indicates a remarkable vitality and an indigenous quality, a quality native to the soil of Jewish life. Some of the finest minds in Israel had a distinct mystical bias. I should like to include all the prophets among the mystics; with this distinction: that



whereas both prophet and mystic were favored with an immediate and divine revelation; whereas both of them felt a contact with divinity, and intuitively received guidance and information, the mystic was content to keep that revelation unto himself as his private and privileged possession, while the prophet, as the name signifies, felt called upon to preach his revelation unto mankind and to endeavor to remould and reconstruct society after the pattern of the vision which was vouchsafed unto him.

In other words, the mystic is the contemplative individual, the man who is content to receive his truth and to live by it,--an individualist, in a sense an egoist. The prophet is an activist, a dynamic personality propelled by his vision to become the spokesman to the world. But there is a distinctively mystic bias in all of the prophets. One finds almost a chapter of theosophy in the sixth chapter of Isaiah--the consecration figure. One finds a rather well developed theosophic system in <sup>the first</sup> each chapter of the book of the prophet Ezekiel.

After the period of the prophets we find great Jewish personalities of the Talmudic age given to mystic study. The Talmud said that Jochanan ben Zaccai, the founder of the great academy at Jamnia, after the destruction of the temple was a great student of theosophy, of Maase Mercaba, based on the first chapter of the Book of Ezekiel, where the holy chariot and the heavenly hosts are described. Rabbi Akiba and Rabbi Joshua, we are told, were students of theosophy. Rabbi



Eliezer ben Hircanus, the Talmud tells us, was given to the study of the mystic value of numbers and letters. Rabbi Simeon ben Yochai spent twelve years in a cave ruminating upon the mysteries of life; and later tradition attributes the great classic text book of medieval Jewish cabala, The Zear, to this Rabbi ben Yochai.

I mention Philo as a representative of the Hellenic school of writers who were mystics, and during the Middle Ages their number increases until it becomes almost legion. We find mystics among rabbis like Nachmanides, among ethical writers like Bachya--of whom I shall speak later on--among poets like Jehuda Halevi and ibn Gabirol; among Jewish statesmen like Isaac Abarbanel and Todros Abulafia. And we find numerous other professional mystics who devote their entire life to the study of mysticism.

Now what is mysticism? Well, there are two kinds. It will help us to understand both if we distinguish the two. There is a real spiritual essential mysticism, and there is the theosophic mysticism. The first is the science of the inner life; the second is the attempt by man to explain the universe, the creation of the world, the administration of the world. The first is the hunger of the human soul for divine communion; the second is an intellectual and almost mechanical attempt to know the universe, to understand it. The first is as real and vital today as it was in the days of the prophets; the second is fast being antiquated and discarded because of modern scientific advancement.



Now we find both in Judaism, in prophecy, in psalm, in prayers, in the homilies and the Agada of the Rabbis, in the hymns and the poetry of the Jews of the Middle Ages,--we find this real spiritual mysticism. In the chapter of creation in the Book of Genesis, in the chapter about the chariot in the Book of Ezekiel, in the chapter about the end of days, in the Book of Daniel; in the apocalyptic literature, in the numerous narratives about the heavenly visits which we find in that literature; in the Logos of Philo; in the angel pseudo-science, and the mysticism of numbers and letters and the doctrine of emanation which crowd the pages of medieval Jewish cabala,--there you find the second type of mysticism which we call theosophy.

I do not want to spend much time on the second type of mysticism; for it is, in the first place, highly involved, and, in the second place, quite irrelevant to modern life. But this should be said about it in explanation of it: that it represents the groping of the mind of man in those generations to solve the same problems which we today attempt to solve in our chemical, in our physical, in our ethical laboratory. That mysticism which we call theosophy was common to all people, not particularly to the Jewish people, and it represents the intellectual curiosity of those generations to understand the nature of the universe, how the world was created, what is the composition of matter, how is the world governed and numerous other problems which have tantalized the mind of man from the beginning of time.



This theosophy is primitive science, and, just like alchemy was the father of modern chemistry, and astrology was the father of modern astronomy, so this Cabala or this theosophy may, in a sense, be called the father of modern physics or modern psychology. They tried, with their inadequate means, with their limited apparatus, tragically limited, to penetrate the scientific secrets of the universe, and they brought to play a remarkable ingenuity, a tremendous intellectual energy which is astounding, were it not so pathetic, realizing how much waste it was.

Now just as the modern scientist goes to his laboratory to discover truth, so the medieval Jewish mystic and theosophist went to his Bible. The Bible contained all truth; not merely moral or ethical truth but all truth. If the mystic was confused about something the Bible was to be his light and his guide; everything was in it; it was the Word of God; it was the complete and perfect revelation of all wisdom for all time. Now the task of man was to discover how to read the Bible so as to find these hidden, sub-surface truths which were there, and that technique for the reading of the inner meaning of the Bible was handed down, so the Cabalists claim, almost from the days of the creation of the world, from one great teacher to another, and that is called Cabala--handed down, received, tradition.

Everything was in the Bible. The Bible was written in the Hebrew which is the holy language, the language of God. There is nothing common or ordinary in the Bible; the



Bible does not spend itself in just telling simple stories, or even in giving simple ethical guidance. There are profound mystic meanings in every phrase, in every word, in every letter, in every vowel and in every accent of the Bible; you must know how to discover those hidden truths, and you must know how to use the four-fold method of interpreting the Bible. The Bible is to be interpreted in four ways; it is to be interpreted in its literal sense--the Peshat; it is to be interpreted in its implied sense--the Remez; it is to be interpreted in its homiletical sense--the Drush; and it is to be interpreted in its secret sense--the Sod. And it is the secret sense of the Bible which is the most profound, the most holy.

Cabala devotes itself to use this secret technique for mining the precious ore of truth which they maintained is found in the Bible. Now they applied themselves to this ceaselessly, not only to satisfy the intellectual curiosity of theirs, of which I spoke a moment ago, but also to satisfy their hunger for revelation, for direct and immediate contact with the source of all truth with God.

Prophecy came to an end with the Babylonian exile. After the completion of the Bible inspiration came to be looked upon with suspicion, because people thought that it might lead to heresy, and life, the spiritual life, was in a sense starved. The whole intellectual energy of the race went into the study of the Talmud and the elaboration of law, and even with the coming of the school of philosophers into



Jewish life in the Middle Ages, they did not bring that freedom to the soul of man which the soul hungered after. The philosophy which they brought was merely a means of establishing the truths of Judaism by the logic of Plato or Aristotle, but it did not open up new channels of revelation; it did not emancipate the heart of man to enable it to roam at ease and at large in the great world of God, and people were hungering for a spiritual freedom which life denied them, which the law denied them, and this Cabala, this msytic lore, enabled them to discover, as it were, new worlds of truth. While at the same time it may be strictly orthodox, they did with the Bible what the Pharisees teachers, you will recall, did with it. The Rabbis before the common era and after the common era who were tied down to the Bible, and who, nevertheless, felt the need of discovering new laws to meet the new conditions of life, used seven or thirteen or thirty-two methods of interpreting the text, so that by remoulding it and by reshaping it they were enabled to read from it the new laws which they required; and so did the Cabalists: by using this mystic technique they were enabled to so remould the Bible, to refashion it, so as to yield them those new spiritual truths which they required.

Cabala itself, this theosophy of which I speak, was the reaction to the rigid life of natural law as well as a reaction to the rationalistic philosophy of the Middle Ages which Maimonides imposed upon the thought of Israel. Maimonides sought to give Israel an Aristotelian Judaism. He



such mystics who traveled this road and discovered this truth is evidenced by the legacy of their experiences which they left. I read to you this morning that marvelous Psalm 139; I wish you would read it when you go home; it is one of the great pieces of literature in the Bible. And there you will recall the mystic--for such he was--speaks of a sense of complete self-surrender to God, and of the omnipresence and the all-pervasiveness of God in his world. "If I ascend into heaven, thou art there; if I go down to the nethermost depths of the earth, thou art there. If I take the wings of the morning and fly to the uttermost parts of the earth, then there thy right hand will take hold of me."

The omnipresence of divinity was a supreme experience in the life of the mystic. Take that beautiful phrase of the 73rd Psalm: "Whom have I in heaven but thee? and beside thee I desire none upon earth." Having God I need nothing else and no one else. Now no one could utter such a phrase unless he experienced in his life the fulness and the hunger-satisfying presence of divinity. The psalmist had that; the great prophet Jeremiah had it. Jeremiah said: "My father the Lord appeared unto me saying, Yea I have loved thee with an everlasting love; therefore with affection have I drawn thee." To be attracted to God as by a magnet, and to find in God the everlasting love. That is mysticism.

In the tenth century there was a Jewish writer ibn Pakuda, by the name of Bachya, who wrote a marvelous text book called "The Duties of the Heart." The book is divided into ten



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noise and confusion and shouting and the wrangling of the world, but you will be able to detect through that confusion the still, small voice of harmony which is God.

Now a little of that mysticism we men and women of the twentieth century ought to bring to bring into our own lives; a little of this spirit of emancipation from the concerns of the world, and a little more of this sweet meditation and communion with the Supreme Spirit of the universe we ought to bring into our lives and into the lives of our children. Perhaps we are not all gifted to become mystics; perhaps we are not all prepared by temperament and disposition to become these religious artists, these geniuses of religion whom we call mystics, but surely we can all try to walk a bit on this mystic highway which they have outlined for themselves and for us. We ought to try to curb a bit our appetites for things, for possessions, for more money, more prosperity and more wealth and bigger homes and richer apparel and more costly jewelry upon our body, as if these things were the real things and not merely the surface things. We ought to try to free ourselves from the incursions of worldly interests which constantly drive in around us from all sides. We ought to think a bit more of that which abides, of the things which last when all else disappears.

And perhaps some day we, too, may be privileged to enjoy for a fleeting moment a flash of that illumination which solves all perplexities and makes all things look right; perhaps you, too, may some day reach that point when, at



peace with ourselves and with the world, we shall be able to  
exclaim as did one of the great mystics of our people: "I  
belong to my beloved, and my beloved belongs to me."

--o--





1- 4 major trends - 4 strands - 4 streams

(a) at times one or other motif dominant - conflict - record is history of just - no as there is one - bid. mental, psychic changes - substitution - copy -

a summary of  
the 4 motifs

→ thing upon which pearls - just, not a  
creed, but a living organism - sp. exper.  
of a race 300 yrs - adventuring - exploration -  
- acted upon by other cultures -

2. Prophecy - most important - not only one - watch gift.

1- what is it? The Protest.

(1) what ought to be in midst, what is -

(2) Faith in Repentability - Evil not  
necessary -

(3) Cry & Progress against Tradition future

(3) Sec. - con. social rel. - pol. - glorious  
love & race

2. The Prophet

not what shall be, what ought to be

not inventor (1) Spoken - not 200th year channels

addressed by vision & ideal people, with stare  
- the total outland there - ecstasy  
- royal bird -

(2) not professional - not charm in

to know - not directed by vision - The  
bird, for fact - unstable

(3) Appear suddenly - used every device

- pleaded scolded - every figure &  
speech - symbolic acts

(4) tragic dishon. -

Jew. laymen  
releg. J. to halber  
- lowly disadvantage



3. His message - Rabbin - "On them given to all  
the no 2 prop. pr. in the same way" -

(1) God - One spirit - exploded idolat.

*with justice +  
Love - Father  
+ Street - was  
usually - 2500  
year*  
(1) Then day - killed by light. power -  
both justice + love - & a war god.

(2) God + Morality ~~the~~ <sup>the</sup> ~~was~~ <sup>was</sup> the sanction  
in faith. Faith & life. in morality

*Ritual cases  
of ritual  
character  
predominant*  
(3) Worship, god, not ritual, but morality

(4) Connected people faith in history's

(5) The Spirit, Order - Essence Sp - Let  
not such man - powerful learned -

*Scorpen  
whiff*  
(5) Social <sup>Solidarity</sup> ~~Reformation~~ "your brother"  
- denounced "dwell at ease"

(6) Inter. Brother - first university  
world - "Have we not all one father -"

(7) Peace - League -

(8) Mission, Genuin. Missionary  
character of all life; each + treat.  
cross-cann & moral leadership

4. Prop. ceased. Freedom - autonomous - direct Rev.  
Exile they let go to exp. rebels + rebellious