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What is Judaism? Part I: Its doctrines, 1926.

"WHAT IS JUDAISM?"

I. ITS DOCTRINES.

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It is very difficult to give a satisfactory definition of an historic faith like Judaism; in fact, no attempt to define Judaism was made until the twelfth century of the common era, and then not by a council or a synod but by an individual. At no time in the history of our people did any authoritative body define the essence or the fulness of Judaism. Apparently there was no need for such a definition. A Jew was born into his faith just as he was born into his race, and he was trained from earliest childhood into a body of religious practices which pre-supposed or suggested a number of religious doctrines.

So that for centuries we had no system of Jewish theology, just as we had no system of Jewish ethics. It was only after a long period of time, considerably later in the history of our faith, especially in the Middle Ages, that the need was felt to set up a definition of our faith. At that time there sprang up sectarianism within Israel, and the leaders of our faith felt it incumbent upon them to define succinctly and sharply what is traditional authoritative Judaism and what is not. And then, too, at that time the religious polemicists, the opposition on the part of other faiths, like Mohammedanism and Christianity, compelled the leaders of our faith to define and to distinguish Judaism from other faiths; and so in response to these inner and outer needs an attempt was made by an individual in the twelfth century--the great Jewish

philosopher, Maimonides, to set up a set of beliefs which completely expressed Judaism. He enumerated thirteen articles of faith. A few centuries later another Hebrew philosopher, Albo, reduced these thirteen to three essential articles of the Jewish faith, namely, the existence of God, revelation and retribution. But it must be borne in mind that these were individual opinions of individual men which never received the sanction of a body, even though they did receive popular approval. Again, it should be borne in mind that these thirteen articles of faith of Maimonides, or these three articles of faith of Albo, never became the test of allegiance to Judaism, and no Jew is ever asked formally to subscribe to them.

There seems to be, rather, a deliberate avoidance in Israel to set up a creed, to formulate a system of dogmas which would represent our faith--a rather deliberate avoidance of any such formulation. And the reason for it is quite apparent: the moment you start to define a thing you are very likely to confine it. A creed is, after all, only a tentative formulation of truth; it is the truth of the hour; and when people attempt to give this tentative truth eternal validity, when they attempt to make that truth which is there binding for all time, then they defeat the very purpose of religion; they thwart the advance, the progress of the spiritual experiment of man which we call religion.

And so while there may be religions for whom

a formal confession of faith is essential, there are religions who make it of primary importance for its devotees to acknowledge or to subscribe to certain formal dogmas. The salvation of the individual is dependent upon his acceptance of a divine creed or a divine dogma; regardless of his moral conduct, regardless of his actions, the acceptance of a creed, of a belief, is essential to salvation. I say, while there may be religions who have thus made belief central in their theology, Judaism is not such a faith. The great Jewish humanist, Moses Mendelssohn, truly stated that Judaism is a life and not a creed. By that he meant that it is a mode of living rather than a system of theologic thinking.

Judaism is a code of moral practices grounded in Godliness rather than a set or a group of metaphysical or theologic speculation. Judaism is ethical idealism rather than intellectual assertions concerning this or that fact in theology. And it should also be borne in mind that Judaism is not found in one book or in one set of books or in one place. The whole of Judaism is not confined in the Bible. There are many laws in the Bible which are today obsolete, even for the orthodox Jew; and there are many practices and institutions in Israel today among reform and orthodox Jews that are not even mentioned in the Bible.

The religious life of our people did not halt with the completion of the Bible. The creative

religious genius of our race passed beyond the Bible into the writings of the Apocrypha, into the writings of the apocalypse, into the writings of the Mishna, into the writings of the Talmud, into the writings of the Midrash, into the religious philosophy and the religious poetry of the Middle Ages and of modern times. Judaism is a living organism, an organism which for more than three thousand years has grown and expanded and developed; according to the laws of its own nature, to be sure, but constantly changed in response to the altered needs of life and to the growing knowledge of the world. And that is what makes it so difficult, well nigh impossible, to define Judaism; and yet if our faith may be said to have no system of dogmas, it yet has a certain number of fundamental principles upon which the whole superstructure is built. All that we understand, when we speak of Judaism, is grounded in a few tremendous convictions, in a few mighty faiths, and without these convictions and without these faiths, which informed the labors of patriarch and prophet, of priest and scribe, of sage and rabbi, through more than thirty generations, -- I say, without these principles and these convictions Judaism is unintelligible. To be sure, Judaism is a mode of living, a code of moral principles, but it is a mode of living which receives its inspiration from certain fundamental and basic truths, certain mighty affirmations of the spirit of man, and of these I want to speak a moment this morning.

First and foremost among these mighty convictions is God. The watchword of Israel inscribed above our sacred altar, and inscribed upon the tablets of our heart, is, "Hear O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is one." There are two parts to this great affirmation--this great affirmation which greeted the dawn and greets the setting sun; this affirmation which falls from the lips of the dying and comforts and consoles the myriad souls of our people; this mighty affirmation which has come down through the ages, with the rhythmic march of the age-old wandering of our people. "Hear O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is one."

God is without and within, in the visible and in the invisible, in the physical and in the spiritual; in the now, in the then, and in the hereafter; above and below and within, God is. In the beginning--God; in the end--God. "He was; he is; he will be--in eternal majesty." The universe is not a blind mechanism, without purpose, without plan, without destiny; the universe is a personality, and all the infinite variety of the universe are but manifestations of the infinite variety of the Supreme Mind and Will who transcends it, as the creator transcends that which he creates, and who indwells within it as the purpose of the creator condescends to dwell within the created. The Lord is our God, and that Lord is one; not a mathematical unity, not an arithmetical unity, but a spiritual and intellectual unity. God is one in the sense of the

oneness of plan and purpose; in the sense of the oneness of the designing and the creative mind; God is one in the sense that he is the sole source and the sole goal; that all things radiate from him and tend towards him. God is one in the sense of constancy of purpose and steadfastness of eternal law; God is one in the sense of the harmony and the perfect organization and the perfect rhythm of his universe. God is one in the sense of his all-encompassing will and his all-encompassing love.

Now these ~~two~~ tremendous affirmations--the existence of God and the unity of God--are the throbbing heart of Judaism. Other religions have come to accept it, and that is well. The classic prayer of our liturgy is, "May all created things come to know thee and unite in one brotherhood to do thy will." But Israel was first to project this revolutionary spiritual truth in the ancient world of idolatry and superstition, and Judaism destroyed idolatry and Judaism emancipated the mind and the soul of man from these primitive superstitions and these primitive dreads. God is, and God is one. The whole of Judaism, said one of the Rabbis, may be expressed in this faith. The Rabbi said, in his homiletical way, "God gave to Moses 613 commandments, 365 negative commandments, in accordance with the number of the days of the year, and 248 positive commandments, in accordance with the number of a man's limits. And David came and reduced them to eleven; and Micah came and reduced them to three. Thou hast been told,

O man, what is good, and what is required of thee is only to do justly, to love mercy and to walk humbly with God. And then the prophet Habakkuk came and reduced them all to one--the righteous man shall live by his faith." That is the rock upon which all else is built.

And this one God is a moral being. I mean by that--or Judaism means by that, that God is not a whimsical tyrant who rules his world according to the whims and the passions of the moment. God is the moral law of the universe; God is the wise and the just ruler of the universe. The God of Israel is not a cruel God; he is a just God. The universe must be based upon the undeviating principles of justice or it cannot endure, just as the social life of man must be established upon the solid, unshaken foundations of righteousness, or anarchy and chaos ensue.

So that the God of Israel is a just God; but God knows that men are finite and frail and weak and capable of sin, and that he created them thus frail and weak; and so God, the God of justice, is also the God of infinite mercy and compassion. "God is righteous in all his ways, but compassionate in all his doings." God is both ruler and father, judge and friend. The world needs both justice and love to correct one another and to supplement one another.

There is retribution in life, says Judaism. The evil will yield evil even as the good will yield good

unto the thousandth generation. God rewards and God punishes--not in our way but in his way. But the moral laws wring their own retribution. One cannot play fast and loose with them. This is Judaism's belief concerning God: one spiritual, moral creator of the universe, who daily recreates it, transcendent and yet imminent; moral, just and merciful. And man, according to Judaism, is the child of God, made in his image, in his spiritual aspirations, which are God's revelations to man. That is how God speaks to man; that is how God reveals himself to man; that is how God reveals his will and his purposes to man,--through the moral and ethical aspirations, through the gropings, through the upreachings of the human soul for the higher levels of life. I say that in his moral aspirations man is kin of God, and man most nearly approaches God when he tries in his own finite and limited way to imitate God. The Rabbis said, "How can man imitate God? Man is puerile, spiritually insignificant, morally corruptible; God is infinite and eternally spiritual." Said the Rabbis, "God said to man, 'Just as I am merciful, so do you try to be merciful one to another. Just as I am righteous, so do you try to be righteous one to another. Just as I feed the hungry and clothe the naked and care for the orphaned and hear the cry of the distressed, so do you do similarly.'"

In the efforts of man to imitate God man most nearly approaches God and man most truly worships God.

Ritual is good; ceremonies have their values, their pedagogic values in life, but the truest worship, the real worship of God is the worship of the deed--of kindness, of justice, of service, of sacrifice. "Of what value are the multitudes of your offerings unto me?" said Isaiah, speaking in the name of God. "Remove your vain oblations from before me. I do not delight in your new moons and in your festivals. Rather wash ye; make ye clean. Remove the evil from before your eyes; cease to do evil. Learn to do well; judge the oppressed; plead for the fatherless; care for the widow." This is the worship of God.

And there is nothing that Judaism has stressed so consistently, so forcibly as these principles of social justice and social righteousness as being the modes of the worship of God. A great English essayist and thinker has this to say: "As long as the world lasts all who want to make progress in righteousness will come to Israel for inspiration, as to the people that had the sense of righteousness most glowing and strongest." This is the phrase of Matthew Arnold. So central is this thought in our religion that the great Hillel, who was the early contemporary of the founder of Christianity, on being asked to state all that Judaism is, in the brief space of a second, said, "That which is hateful unto thyself do not do unto others. This is the whole of the Torah; the rest is commentary. Go and study it."

"That which is hateful unto thyself do not do

unto others." That is the negative formulation of the positive commandment already found in our Book of Leviticus, "Love thy neighbor as thyself, for I am the Lord." A man in his service of God, in his worship of God, in his petitions to God, needs no mediator, needs none to intercede for him. Man is the child of God; all men are the sons of God. A man can come to his Father in Heaven directly and immediately through prayer, through spiritual exaltation, and seek communion with his Heavenly Father. And when he has erred, when he has sinned, when he has wandered from the right path, then, too, he can come as a child comes to his father, begging forgiveness directly to his father.

And as deriving from these great moral compulsions of our faith, two other great moral principles stand out as characteristic of Judaism. One is the ideal of the brotherhood of man. God is one; all men are his children. "Have we not all one father? Hath not one God created us all? Why, then, should we deal treacherously one with another?" In the sight of God there are no white or black or yellow or brown or red; in the sight of God there are men held in the iron restraints of human destiny, subject to a common law, suffering from common limitations, seeking a common happiness. All are brothers.

A fine writer, not so very long ago, in speaking of our modern debt to Israel--Professor Baldwin--says this of Israel's preachment of human brotherhood:

"Whatever there is in modern civilization that is making for human fraternity; whatever religious aspiration is calling men to a higher sense of duty; wherever men and women are toiling to prove that humanity is a great brotherhood, there we find men living, acting, thinking under the influence of these leaders of Hebrew thought--the prophets of Israel."

With the ideal of human brotherhood inevitably came the ideal of universal peace. "Peace be unto those who are far and unto those who are near." Israel visioned the day when men will shed the ugly and hateful accouterments of the jungle life--the hates, the animosities, the rivalries, leading to bloodshed and to disaster, and will unite in voluntary cooperative efforts for the enrichment of life and the ennobling of civilization. And Judaism long ago, almost three thousand years ago, projected the marvelous vision into the consciousness of mankind, the vision of that glorious day when men will beat their swords into plowshares and their knives into pruning hooks; when nations will not lift up sword against nation, nor learn war any more.

Universal peace based on universal righteousness of the
ness has been and is today one, essential and indispensable convictions--principles, if you will--of our historic faith.

And lastly, friends, the doctrines of Judaism contain also this doctrine concerning the role which Israel as a people is to play in the world. The religion

of Israel is a universal religion, because the God of Israel is the God not only of Israel but of all mankind. There is not a place so small, as small as the heart of a child, where God is not, and there is not a place as vast as the solar system which can quite contain Him. He is the God of everything and of everyone. And yet the people of Israel long ago, by an act of spiritual decision, by an expression of the corporate will of the people of Israel, established a peculiar relationship with God which it called a covenant--the covenant of Abraham, the covenant of Sinai; that covenant of which the prophet Jeremiah speaks--the covenant to be God's servants in the world; to be his ministers; to be his priests, to preach his truth, his law to mankind. Israel chose itself and assumed voluntarily the burden of being the servants of God in the world. And this is the doctrine of the chosen people, which is so frequently misconstrued, but which is, nevertheless, quite basic in the religious thinking of Israel. Israel does not look upon itself as having been chosen for special favors, special privileges; God knows no partiality and no favoritism and no bribery; Israel was chosen not because of its peculiar merits or peculiar superior racial or mental endowments--not at all. In none of the classic writings of our people do you find any undue praise given to Israel by the prophets of the people and the spokesmen of the people. Rather do you find denunciation and castigation for the people's failings and shortcomings. The doctrine of the

chosen people does not at all partake of that quality of racial or national superiority which has today become the fond obsession of some peoples or races in the world. Nor has that doctrine of the chosen people at any time inspired Israel to set out upon a career of conquest by might to subdue the world, as a similar doctrine of selection has inspired other people.

The doctrine of the chosen people simply meant that Israel volunteered to assume the crown and the cross of religious guidance and leadership in the world; to teach the word of God; to teach the law of God to those who may not yet have heard it. And this has brought Israel great tribulation and suffering and sorrow. Religious leadership may be a crown but it is a crown of thorns. How faithful Israel has remained to this charge--"Be unto them a kingdom of priests and a holy people"--"let our martyred dead bear testimony; let all the great social movements of mankind which felt the impact of the dynamic spirit of the Jew bear testimony; let the cross and the crescent bear testimony, for they kindled their torch at the sacred fires of our altar; let the Renaissance and the Reformation bear testimony, for in the intellectual preparation for the one Israel played not an inconsiderable role, and in the ideology of the other a most decisive role; let all the great humanitarian movements of the last century bear testimony, for they, too, felt the driving urge, the prophetic impulse which is the peculiar heritage and the

peculiar challenge of the sons and daughters of Israel.

These, then, friends, are the essential principles of Judaism: concerning God, who is one, spiritual, moral, just and merciful. Concerning man: man is the child of God, who most nearly approaches God as he most truly imitates spiritual qualities which he ascribes unto God; who most truly worships God by serving his fellowmen; who can come into constant communion with God directly and immediately; whose supreme obligations are to lead the righteous life, the life conducive to righteousness, to brotherhood and to peace. And concerning Israel: Israel is the priest people, burdened with an historic destiny to preach the Word of God; to be the prophetic voice calling, even in the wilderness, men to duty, to service, to self-sacrifice, to peace, and to love.

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