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My quest of God, 1926.

"MY QUEST OF GOD."

Where is the Way

To the Dwelling of Light?

RABBI ABBA HILLEL SILVER.

THE TEMPLE, SUNDAY MORNING.

DECEMBER 12, 1926, CLEVELAND.

JOSEPH T. KRAUS
Shorthand
Reporter
CLEVELAND

This poem was written by one of the greatest Hebrew poets of the Middle Ages,--Solomon ibn Gabirol, who lived more than a millennium ago.

"I have sought Thee daily at dawn and twilight,

I have stretched my hands to Thee, I have turned
my face to Thee,

Now the cry of a heart athirst I will utter,

Like the beggar who cries at my door for grace.

The infinite heights are too small to contain Thee,

Yet perchance Thou canst niche Thee in the clefts
of my heart.

Shall my heart not treasure the hope to gain Thee,

Or my yearning fail till my tongue's last plea?

Nay surely Thy name I will worship, while

Breath in my nostrils be."

I have sought Thee daily at dawn and at twilight; I have stretched my hands to Thee; I have turned my face like the beggar who cries at my door for grace. The infinite heights are too small to contain Thee, yet perchance Thou canst niche Thee in the clefts of my heart.

The quest of God, my friends, has been the immemorial pursuit of man from that distant day when the first ray of light broke in upon the darkened mind of man until our own day - until our own day when the mind of man aspires to reach out into the infinite spaces to grasp the

laws which control the stars and the planets in their courses; until our own day when the mind of man aspires to probe into the secret of the atom and to discover the source and the origin of life.--from that day to this the mind of man has reached out to grasp the ultimate reality--to understand God. And the choicest children of man, the poet through his song, the philosopher through his reason and logic, the mystic through his vision, the scientist through his probing and his experiments.--each one in his own way sought to pull aside, if only for a fraction of time, the dark curtains which veil the eternal mystery. Each one in his own way was on a pilgrimage to find the dwelling place of light--which is God.

The Psalmist speaks of this quest of God as a thirst for God. "As the hart panteth after the pools of water, so my soul panteth for Thee, O God" - a marvelous bit of imagery. The parched lips of the spirit panting for the refreshing waters of God's consolation.

Now, why this quest? What prompts man to set out upon this pilgrimage to discover God? Why does the Psalmist say, "My heart and my flesh cry out for the living God"? Why does the poet say that "I have reached out my hand and I have turned up my face like the beggar knocks at my door for grace"? Why does man seek God? Why, clearly because man needs God as he needs food. I have spoken of this before, and I have tried to make you see that the spiritual needs of man are just as real as the

physical needs of man; that man cannot live his full life, that man cannot encompass his highest possibility unless he had these spiritual needs of his life. In order that a man may have a beautiful outlook upon life, in order that a man may entertain ideals because of the beauty and the charm of life, in order that man may have a satisfying philosophy of life, he must have a strong conviction concerning God, and more especially in order that a man may endure the tribulations of life, when the tides and the breakers of misfortune overwhelm him, man must have a strong, steadfast hold upon a fundamental faith in God.

Now, how does man find God? What paths do we pursue in our quest of God? Well, there is no royal road to God. There is no one highway which leads to the dwelling place of light. There are many roads which the feet of man have trod. In fact, all roads, if pursued to the end, lead to the threshold of God. There have been three main highways, however, which man has followed through the ages in his eternal seeking. Man has come to God, first, through Nature, through a contemplation of God's handiwork. You will recall that the prophet Isaiah, in the great 40th Chapter, declares, "Lift up your eyes above and see who created thee!" - for in spite of much that is still incomprehensible to us, we are still able to discern in the universe a certain order or orderliness, a certain system,-- the stars in their eternal swing through space, and the planets in their endless migrations follow some preordained

courses with precision and certainty. There is no wilfulness; there is no caprice in the movements of all that is, whether it be the atom who follows undeviatingly the laws of its nature and its composition, or whether it be a solar system; each in its way is controlled by a law not of its own making; in all things there is decipherable a plan, an order, a system, a law. And our entire science is based on the assumption that in the universe there is law. When science analyzes a substance or an element, it can then predict how that element and that substance will work tomorrow and the next day and the next year and the next ten thousand years, on the assumption that the laws of the universe are irrevocable, unbreakable and eternal.

Now law implies a law giver, and order implies one who orders, and system implies a mind and an intelligence which systematizes, and the universe, therefore, to the seeker after truth, points to God. There are no accidents in the physical world. Things are accidents only to us when they bring us weal or woe unexpectedly, but in the universe itself there is no accident. And Nature did not stumble upon its mechanical perfection. Perfection does not come by chance, by accident, but by planning, arrangement and order. And so the Psalmist was justified in saying, "The heavens declare the glory of God; and his handiwork is attested by the heavens above."

Then man has come through Nature to God in yet another way. As he observed the physical world he

discovers in it an ascendent movement, an upward climb, an evolution from the less perfect to the more perfect, from the simple to the more complex. First, the nebula, and then the flaming gas, and then the atoms, and then the more complex organization of matter and substance, and then life emerges, and then consciousness emerges, and then reason and intellect emerges, and then ideals and aspirations emerge and climb an ascendancy, a definite and persistent upward movement, which cannot be the result of a blind series of accidents.

In this all inspiring movement which has gone on throughout the unnumbered cycles one can discern the outlines of a design, of an ascendancy, of a movement towards a goal. A design implies one who designs, and a goal implies one who set that goal and directs all movement towards the goal. That movement is slow and almost imperceptible to our mortal eyes, but that purpose which determined that ascendent movement moves through cycles of eternity, and in His sight a thousand years are but as yesterday when it is gone.

That same miracle which we behold in a growing plant, that same epic which you can read in a flower as it passes through myriad stages from the bulb in the soil to the final full-flowering of it, in all its colorfulness and glory, that imperceptible series of slight changes all leading upward, all pushing into fuller and richer life,--that same design one can see in the whole

universe, that, to the seeker after truth, points to Divinity.

There is a beautiful little poem by Edward Markham. He says:

"I made a pilgrimage to find a God,

I listened for His voice at holy tombs,

Searched for the print of His immortal feet in dust

and broken altars, yet turned back with empty heart.

But on the homeward road a great light came upon me,

And I heard that God's voice singing in a

nestling lark,

Felt His sweet wonder in a swaying rose,

Received His blessing from a wayside well,

Looked on His beauty in a lover's face,

Saw His bright hand send signals from the sun."

That is the first way that one pursues the quest of God. And the second way is the way of introspection. From a contemplation of the universe within we can perceive the foot-prints of Divinity, even as much as from a contemplation of the universe without. For we, ourselves, are fearfully and wonderfully made. The very structure of our being, of our physical being, not to speak of our mental and spiritual being, is a miracle. And that same orderliness which we observe in the physical world without we discover in the physical world of our own self. Every corpuscle of blood, every fiber of our being, every tissue, every gland obeys a law. There is no

deviation from the law of action and reaction which every particle of our being must observe. And in the history of man, even as in the history of the universe, we can read the record of an unfolding purpose, of a plan which works slowly but surely to an appointed, ultimate goal. That which fashioned a Plato and a Newton and a Shakespeare out of the gibbering man ape in the jungle is not a blind and staggering series of mishaps and haps and chances, but a slowly evolving purpose which is constant and undeviating.

One must be supremely superstitious, superstitious beyond the superstitions of the most orthodox to accept a theory of accident to account for the glorious record of man's growth through the eons and the eternities. If it is Nature that forced man to become what he is - and by common consent man is today much more than he was ten thousand or a hundred thousand years ago - then Nature has a design and God is there. If it is man himself who, through a desperate struggle with Nature, through his efforts to master Nature, developed himself and raised himself to the position where he now is, which is infinitely higher, by common consent, than the position which was his a hundred thousand years ago, then it is in the vital urge which moves man that a design is discernable, and God is there. And if it is Nature and man acting and reacting one upon the other which fashioned man, then there is design in both of them and God is in them.

And man can discover God within himself in

yet another way; because man can discover traces of design within him not merely of the past, of what has taken place, of his slow evolution through the long years behind him, but man can discover intimations of a design in what is yet to be, in the promptings and the yearnings of his soul, for what is not but ought to be. We have ideals; we all have aspirations; we all know that we are imperfect; we seek to improve ourselves; we seek to transcend ourselves. We reach out into the unknown and into the future for new qualities of truth and new qualities of beauty and new qualities of goodness, and we try, as it were, to lift ourselves by our bootstraps unto a new heaven, unto a new level of being.

What are all these aspirations within us but intimations of a goal towards which we are bending? We are restless and we are constantly seeking to out-do ourselves and to transcend ourselves, because we know that we have not yet reached the goal, that there is a goal of ultimate perfection which we must attain through the ages. Now if there is that goal there is one who set the goal; and if there is the possibility of a definite and constant self-improvement to reach that goal, then there is a design which controls it. The restlessness which is ours and which is our crown and our glory, and all the romance and the beauty of life, the prophetic urge which is in the souls of the best of us and in the whole human race, why, that is the overture which precedes the next act in our drama of

evolution; that speaks of what is yet to come, and all that is an intimation of a purposefulness in the world. We know that we are on the crest of a great movement, a forward step, and so we have ideals and aspirations. And perhaps it is in these aspirations that we perceive of God most clearly; for it is within that we are on the highest point of our being; for it is within that we are most spiritual and less physical.

And lastly, my friends, there is a third road which leads to God, and that is contemplation; not merely of the history of man individually, but the history of man collectively, the history of the human race. For in the record of the race from its dim beginnings millennia ago, until the present time, there, too, one can decipher the story of a ceaseless ascent, of a steady upward urge. While we still have our sad deficiencies and our tragic shortcomings as a race, while there is still much of the cruelty and much of ugliness and much of ignorance in our life as a race, still, if we are to take the long view of history, we cannot help but acknowledge that mankind has progressed, that mankind has moved far, far away from the dim distant past of the jungle. We have gained in fullness and in richness and in the ennoblement of life. There is much more freedom in the world today and much less servitude; there is much more knowledge in the world today and much less ignorance; there is much more tolerance and good will and understanding and contacts

between peoples and races in the world today and much less of fear and suspicion. Slavery has been destroyed; the desperate poverty in which the whole race lived in the distant past is slowly being destroyed, and even that last vestige of the jungle--War, which is still devastating the human race, is being attacked vigorously by millions of God's children, who are determined to destroy that last and ghastliest vestige of jungle life, whether it will be a generation or a century or five centuries. But war will be outlawed. And so in the collective life of the human race one can find traces of an unfolding, beneficent purpose, of a wisdom which moves through history. And that, too, points to God.

Now, it is along these paths, my friends, that I see God: through nature, through my own inner nature; through my own spiritual life, and in the records of my entire race, the race of men. I think of God as a creative energy, as of the creative energy of the human universe, the source of all that is and is to be, the substance and the form and the purpose of everything. I think of God as of the personality of the universe, whose wisdom integrates the world, holds it together, directs it to his own ultimate purposes. I think of God as of the omnipotent goodness, as of the ultimate and absolute truth, as of the moral ultimates, the best in the universe. I do not think of him as some moderns do, as of a struggling God, a sort of an Ahura Mazda, a God of Light struggling against Ahriman, the god of

Darkness. I do not think of my God as of one power waging war upon other powers. My conception of the universe is not dualistic nor pluralistic but monolistic. It is one. God is omnipotent; God is omniscient. For God is all and in all. It is I who am impotent in many things, and finite and weak and struggling; and God meant that I should be finite and weak and struggling, for without these things human life is unimportant. Finite life, eternal life, divine life does not require struggle, but human life, finite life finds its whole meaning and significance in passing from the lower to the higher, from the bad to the good, from the good to the better. Else what is life but self-improvement, self-development? If man were perfect, if all his ideals were already realized, if he had all that he wished to have, if he was all that he wished to be, why, life would stagnate; there would be no meaning to life. It is man that must struggle and in his struggles find the strength and the consolation of constant achievements. But God is omnipotent, all-knowing and all-wise.

At times my vision of Him is not clear. At times I feel like a man lost in a fog. At times when I behold about me great sorrow or the tragedies which come into the dwelling places of the children of man, I am full of doubts and fears; I am troubled and bewildered, and shadows fall athwart the broad path which leads to Him. And every man and every seeker after God will have these moments of doubt and fear and loneliness. But as he meditates, as

he retraces his steps along the path which he has followed; as he reasons through the problem anew, his faith returns stronger and more healing than before, and on his lips come the words of the ancient Psalmist, beautiful words, healing words: "The Lord is my light and my salvation; what need I fear." I am in His world; I am part of His purpose. Wherever I turn, whithersoever I go, I am in His world. His will surges through me, and I am part of Him. "If I ascend into heaven, Thou art there, and if I go down into the nethermost parts of the world Thou art there, and if I take the wings of the morning and fly to the uttermost parts of the world, even there will thy right hand take hold of me and uphold me."

My quest leads me to a great illuminating, strengthening confidence. "Yea, though 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."

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At times my vision of Him is not clear. At times I feel like a man lost in a fog. At times when I behold about me great sorrow or the tragedies which come into the dwelling places of the children of man, I am full of doubts and fears; I am troubled and bewildered, and shadows fall athwart the broad path which leads to Him. And every man and every seeker after God will have these moments of doubt and fear and loneliness. But as he meditates, as

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Wherever I turn, whithersoever I go, I am in His world.

His will surges through me, and I am part of Him. "If I ascend into heaven, Thou art there, and if I go down into the nethermost parts of the world Thou art there, and if I take the wings of the morning and fly to the uttermost parts of the world, even there will thy right hand take hold of me and uphold me."

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