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The essence of all religion - What is it?, 1929.

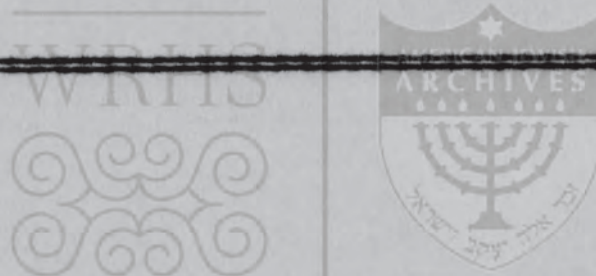
"THE ESSENCE OF ALL RELIGION--

WHAT IS IT?"

RABBI ABBA HILLEL SILVER,

THE TEMPLE, SUNDAY MORNING,

MARCH 31, 1929, CLEVELAND, O.



Religions, my friends, are as numerous as races of men. Time and place and history and climate have molded races differently, but there always remains an essential human race--the human family. And so time and place, history and experiences and peculiar religious leadership have fashioned religions differently, but there always remains a universal religion, the element or elements common to all religions.

Now there is no harm at all in the existence in the world of a diversity of religions, and the persistence of such a diversity does not indicate any weakness in religion or any untruth in it. Religions need not necessarily be one. There is no one philosophy; there is no one art; there is no one type or style of literature. Any human effort which depends upon the subjective element of the individual or of the group will come to partake of a distinctiveness and a separateness characteristic of that individual and that group.

I had occasion a few weeks ago, on the Pacific Coast, to attend a Chinese opera, and the music, to me, seemed absolutely barbarous; to the hundreds and hundreds of Chinamen in the theatre the music was absolutely entrancing, enthralling; they were moved to tears by it; they were uplifted by it. I venture to say

that our music and our Beethoven and Wagner and Bach would seem barbarous to them. And in them and in us is a hunger for music.

I suppose if they, the Chinese or the Orientals, would look upon our modern paintings, they would laugh in derision; yet to many of us that painting has profound meaning, and yet in them and in us there is a hunger to express ourselves through lines and color and form and mass.

When the human race was in its infancy it thought that the ideal of human life was oneness. You remember that beautiful, poetic story of the Bible: before the people presumed to build the tower of Babel all people spoke one speech, and all were of one race, and when they became presumptuous and arrogant and set about building a tower whose head would reach into the clouds, to the very heavens, God, so says this legend, confused the tongues and peoples and scattered them to the four winds of the earth.

Judging from this legend we might conclude that the ideal was that condition which prevailed before the building of the tower of Babel. In reality it is not so. Civilization may be said to have begun--- I am speaking now figuratively---with the dispersion and the scattering of peoples over the face of the earth and with the confusion in their speech. But don't you see it is only out of the conflict and the clash of

diverse opinion, that the spark of originality is born.

No, we need not lament the fact that there exists in the world today so many different religions. What we ought to try to seek to discover is the common spiritual denominator of all religions. What are the basic ideals underlying them all? What are they? Today the whole of Christendom is celebrating perhaps its holiest festival---Easter. This festival commemorates the resurrection of the Master of Christianity. He had been crucified; he had been entombed; and he was dead. But on the third day he arose; he was resurrected. That has become a cardinal principle in Christianity, a cardinal article of faith.

The belief in resurrection is not peculiar to Christianity; in fact, it was a dominant note in almost every religion of antiquity, and in most of the orthodox religions of our own day. One cannot read the story of any of the great religions without finding this mass of what we call eschatology---the story of what happens at the end of things, in the hereafter, after death.

Shall we say, then, that resurrection is an essential of religious faith? Well, modern man has rejected it. The modern progressive religionist does not make his religion depend upon a belief in a physical resurrection. His science contradicts it. All that he knows of biology contradicts it. He has finally rejected

it.

Shall we say that immortality is of the essence of religion? Many progressive religionists who have surrendered belief in physical resurrection, nevertheless believe in the continuity of human personality after the decomposition of the perishable body. Shall we say that that is an indispensable element of religion? Well, there are great religions in the world which do not accept the doctrine of immortality. There is a great religion, that of the Buddhist, who look upon immortality as altogether undesirable. They do not wish for the persistence of human personality after death. Rather do they hope for a complete breakup of personality, the loss of identity, the individual losing himself in the great whole of the universe, even as the drop of water loses itself in the great ocean.

There are some men of strong faith and great belief who do not wish to think at all about death or immortality. They are content to live their life upon this earth, and for the number of years which a kind Providence allotted to them, and make the best of that; and even those who do believe in immortality, many of them would not wish to make that an indispensable item of their religious conviction.

Recently I was asked to contribute an article to a symposium on the subject of "Immortality," to a book which will be published soon by one of the

publishing houses in New York. Briefly, this is what I said: This, of all things, I can conceive of least: my own death. I have seen death in others many times. Even in them death seemed to me an intrusion or an interlude rather than a finality. Perhaps it is because I have never been able to think of anything as ending, or, for that matter, as beginning. I know being. I have never experienced non-being. I do not refuse to think of death; I do not know how to think of it. I have no particular longing for immortality, but I am in the stream of life, and I cannot escape it. My life began with the life of the universe and can only end with it. It has served through infinite cycles and phases of being; it will continue its appointed course uninterruptedly. All things are alive, and in their transformations only pass into new forms and ways of life. Death is the peak of a life wave; and so is birth. Death and birth are one. Of all life forces thought is the most marvelous and baffling. Of it I am continuously and sharply aware. In me it is my essential wealth, my unity and my uniqueness. At the close of its present cycle it may combine, or it may scatter and re-organize into a new integration. It cannot disappear.

I would not lose my zest for living, or my purpose in life, if there were no immortality, for I would be deprived of the only intelligent conception of life of which I am capable. If we were strong enough

to face death without sorrow, we could come to face immortality without joy; for the life we enter through death, if it be conscious life, must of necessity have its pain as well as its peace, its defeats as well as its victory. Death is not the last stage of the soul's Calvary. "The righteous," said the Rabbis, "have no repose either in this world or in the worlds to come." My comfort and my sustenance is not immortality but God. His universe is perfect, and my destiny is part of his perfection, even my tears and all my broken hopes.

So that there be many among us who, though believing in immortality, would yet not care to make that a cornerstone of our faith.

Shall we say that the miraculous revelation is an essential of faith? - a divine man, a divine book, which reveals unto man the secrets of religion? I am afraid that today we cannot subscribe to that. Religion must justify itself sui generis. Religion must justify itself on the basis of the truth of its own premises and its own conclusions, not on the basis of some miraculous intervention in the course of history which occurred at some given time, or not on the basis of what is written in a certain sacred text.

The modern man of faith looks upon all men as divine and all truth as divine, and he regards revelation not as an event which occurred once upon a

time and ceased, but as something which is going on continually in the lives of men with their questing after truth, with their outreaching after reality. Every time the human being gropes through the fogs which enswathe him, and reaches out after a spiritual illumination, an intellectual truth, there a revelation takes place, whether it be in the realm of religion or science or art. No, the miraculous revelation cannot be made, today at least, the essential of faith.

Shall we say that the ritual is the essence of faith? - the ceremonies, the sacraments, the propitiations, ⁱⁿ the olden days the sacrifices? Shall we make the religious ritus, the religious rite, the heart of the religious experience? No, I do not believe we would consent to that. We look upon ritual as a necessary pedagogic instrument in the religious life. The religious ceremony has tremendous value in the religious life. It lends color; it lends charm; it is a reminder; it is an inspiration; it is a guide, and it is a beautiful raiment for the abstract religious idea. A man needs more than abstract ideas to live by, but surely, we cannot make the means the end of religion.

What, then, is the essence of religion? Well, I should say that the first essential of religion, of all religions, is the deep conviction in the purposeful universe; a deep conviction, not proved by logic and yet not contraverted by it; a profound conviction, not

proved by science and yet not contradicted by science; a conviction that the universe is purposeful; that it has plan.

There are only two possible attitudes which a human being can take to this vast mystery of the universe, and each attitude can be backed up by many seemingly, at least, valid arguments: the attitude of the materialist, and the attitude of the religionist or the spiritualist. The materialist,--or by whatever name you take him,--believes that everything in the universe is physical; that everything can be reduced to the physical or the material; and that this physical mass called the universe, of which man and animal and plants and energies are a part,--this physical universe operates from mechanical laws. It is not controlled because controlling implies an intelligence. It just is, and it carries along, along the channels of inevitable and immutable mechanical laws, which somehow came into existence, or, rather, which always existed. It is the same thing, after all.

Now many an argument can be produced to substantiate that point of view. It cannot be absolutely proved. Scientists have proved it, and scientists have disproved that self-same point of view.

The other point of view is of the religionist, or the spiritualist. The universe is not a thing, however huge that thing may be. Not matter, not

physical, but essentially a personality, a vital intelligence, a dynamic will, expressing itself through infinite manifoldedness. This universe has a purpose; there is mind there, willing, thinking, planning, creating. Now many strong and valid arguments may be adduced to prove that point of view. Scientists have proved it, and scientists have disproved it. But the religious man in this situation, where he has the choice between two attitudes and two points of view, equally certain and equally uncertain, chooses the latter of the two points of view because it seems to give to him a philosophy of life which is wholesome, which is helpful, which is optimistic, which gives meaning and reason to his experience.

That is the first essential of all religion. The man who does not hold to that point of view is not a religious man. He may be a very good man; he may give to charity, and he may be a very kindly spoken individual. He is not a religious man. Morality and religion are not synonymous. Religion leads to morality, as we shall see in a moment, is, in fact, the driving impulse of the moral life, but it is not morality.

That I regard as the first essential of religion; and the second essential I would say is a profound conviction in the moral government of the universe, a profound conviction, again, which cannot be proved, but which cannot equally be disproved in the

moral order of the universe. A Supreme Intelligence cannot but be a supreme goodness. The world is fundamentally moral. We may not always understand the workings of God in the universe. The private soldier in a battle may see a whole battalion annihilated, and not knowing the plan and strategy of the war, may charge the general either with stupidity or with cruelty. But the general knows his plan, and the sacrifice of a battalion he may regard as necessary to save the army, to win the battle. What you and I, and the wisest of us, can see of the scheme of things, is but a pawn in the game of the universe.

I think it was the great Darwin who said that all the knowledge which we possess is a little island in an endless sea of ignorance. We cannot understand the purpose and the plan of this universe, the very physical reach of which is beyond our imagination. Wherefore the religious man believes, and in that belief he finds sustenance of spirit, confidence and strength and a way of life; that there is in this world a moral purpose, a goodness seeking its own ends; not a blind, brutal force which grinds him down into the dust.

The religious man knows that there is evil in the world, and the religious man is sometimes tortured, harrowed by sorrows which come into his life. "The arrow that flyeth by day, and the pestilence that walketh in darkness"; the frustrations and the disasters

which come unwelcomed, and yet do come. He knows all that. But he is not a foolish romanticist, to shut his eyes and say, "These things do not exist; they are merely the imaginations of my mortal mind." But he says to himself, "These evils in the world are part of the great scheme of things; they belong; they must have a purpose to serve in my life. Perhaps they are a discipline for me; perhaps they are a challenge for me; perhaps they are there to temper me; perhaps they are there to bring out the strength that is in me, the courage that is in me, the faith that is in me; perhaps that tragedy has come into my life to help me understand a little more the sweet, sad music of humanity, the sufferings of other people, the needs of other human beings. I will make the best of it, content to leave it all in the hands of God, who orders all things well, whether I understand it or not."

That is the second essential of religion--belief in the moral order of the universe. And the third and last essential, as I see it, is this: a profound conviction---remember, in all these things I am not speaking of profound knowledge, for knowledge can help us very little in this field of human values. Knowledge is a thing seen and measured and weighed in the balance; not of interpretations, not of values, not of attitudes,---the third essential of religion is profound conviction that human life sees its culmination

in moral idealism.

Let me put it in simpler terms: that life yields to man its profoundest meaning when man strives after perfection. The religious man does not look upon man as upon an animal, a composite of so many chemical precipitates; the religious man does not look upon man merely as upon a living organism, as a biologist looks upon him. To the religious man, man is made in the image of God. That is the most marvelous sentence that has ever been penned by the hand of a God-inspired man. Man made in the image of God: "Thou hast made him but a little lower than the angels." That is how the religious man looks upon human life. Not as a man of corruption, to be returned to the cold earth after a brief space of time; a body subject to all the ailments and the accidents of life,--to sickness and pain and misery, sharing all the inclemencies of weather, and all the accidents of time and place with the animal.

Man belongs to a different kingdom, a spiritual kingdom,--not perfect, because he is still, much of him, physical and perishable, but, nevertheless, he belongs to a higher realm of being,---Mind, soul, aspiration. Human life finds its highest expression in the minds of the religious man, in moral idealism. Now that means much more than obeying the moral law. A man may obey the moral law; a man may be good because he is afraid; because he is afraid of public

opinion; because he is afraid of being caught and punished. The supreme opportunity of life to the religious man is not obedience to the laws of society, but obedience to the highest moral instincts of which a man is capable. In the effort to transcend himself, to rise above himself, to reach out for ever higher levels,--therein does man find the highest meaning of his life.

Now that does not mean that striving will give man happiness, or that striving will give man peace of mind, or that striving will give man success. Not at all. Quite the reverse, often. The moral pathfinder, the moral pioneer, the man who tries to outdistance himself, very frequently has his feet torn by the brute circumstances of life. Very frequently all he has to show for his strivings and his sacrifices are heartaches. And yet therein is the meaning of life to the religious man. "Walk thou with Me (God) and be thou perfect." That is the challenge of the religious mand.

These three essentials, as I see it, friends, constitute the essence of all religion,--- profound belief in a purposeful universe in which God lives; profound conviction that this universe is a moral universe; and, lastly, profound conviction that in this moral universe man is a co-worker of God, seeking to build an evermore perfect order of society; seeking to

establish what our ancients called "the Kingdom of God," here upon earth. And the man who has these three convictions, my friends, which summarize the essence of religion, will express these three convictions, first, in certain moods which we call religious, and then in certain actions which we choose to call religions. Thus, for example, the religious man, the man who deeply holds these three articles of faith, will take into life an attitude which is characteristic of religion,--the attitude of reverence and humility.

I read you that marvelous definition of the prophet Micah, as to what constitutes religion, this morning. "Thou hast been told, O man, what is good and what the Lord doth require of thee, only to do justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with thy God." Why, don't you see, friends, that when a man stands before this sweep of the eternal, before the beauty of things visible, which are temporal, and the mystery of the things invisible, which are eternal,--when a man stands before this marvelous world, he cannot but be wrapped in adoration; he cannot help but be supremely reverent and humble.

"What is man that thou art mindful of him, and the son of man that thou rememberst him?" A speck, Myriads of light years in interstellar spaces, infinite solar systems swinging through infinite space,--what is my brief life compared to these? Humility and

reverence, yes, and piety. That is part of the mood of the religious man. A sense of dependence. With all my wisdom and all my knowledge, and all the machinery with which I have surrounded myself, I am still just a weak, oftentimes helpless, little being of three-score years and ten. I want to have around me in my hour of need the supporting arms of the eternal; I want to be fathered, befriended; I want to feel that beside me there is a kinsman and a friend.

That is what piety means; and I feel, as the religious man feels very often in this life, a need for communion with this kinsman and friend, with this eternal spirit of God. That is worship, that is prayer, that is all part of the mood which goes inevitably with the religious life. It is not prayer which makes a religious man; it is the religious man who wants to pray. Prayers leap to our lips, but the soul is attuned to the infinite. We want to express our admiration, our gratitude, our thankfulness, the burdens of our souls, our desperate needs of life. That is prayer. The sacrifice of the heart; that is prayer.

And then the religious life finally leads to actions which we call religious. The religious man who believes in the moral government of the universe will want to lead a moral life, a life of justice and a life of goodness. Nay, more, he will want to be, as I have said, a pathfinder, a pioneer in the realm of

morality. And that is what we mean by prophecy. The supreme expression of the religious conviction is prophecy. But what is prophecy? A great passion of the religious soul to make God regnant upon earth; to establish God's laws in human life. That is what prophecy is. " "

And so the real religious man becomes a disciple of the prophets, a man who goes through the highways and the byways of life seeking his brethern; a man who goes through life as a healing, as a light, as a comfort, as a strength to those who need him; a man who will see injustice and set about to correct it; a man who goes through life seeing wounds and setting about to heal them; a man who will go through life as God goes through His universe,--a friend.

"Just as God is merciful, so be thou merciful." That is the way of life which the religious convictions give to men.

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sermon 297

The TEMPLE BULLETIN

THE TEMPLE

East 105th St. and Ansel Rd.
CLEVELAND, OHIO

Abba Hillel Silver, D.D.
RABBI

Rabbi Leon I. Feuer
Minister of Religious Education

1929

SUNDAY, MARCH 31, 1929

RABBI SILVER

will speak on

"The Essence of All Religion—
What Is It?"

The Sabbath Eve Service
5:30 to 6:10

The Sabbath Morning Service
11:00 to 12:00

The Temple Bulletin, published weekly from the middle of September to June, by Tifereth Israel Congregation, E. 105th Street at Ansel Road, Cleveland, Ohio. E. E. Wolf, Pres.; Emanuel Einstein, Treas.; Rabbi Leon I. Feuer, Editor. Subscription price, 50 cents per annum.

Entered as second-class matter, Dec. 11, 1925, at the Post office at Cleveland, Ohio, under the act of March 3, 1879.

Music for Sunday Morning, March 31st

Organ

Prelude (10:15 A. M.)

Epithalamium Matthews

Where Wild Judea Stretches Far

..... Stoughton

Andante Gluck

Postlude

Carillon Rogers

Paul Allen Beymer

Alto Solo

The Omnipotence Schubert

Alice Shaw Duggan

Rabbi Silver in the East

Rabbi Silver spent the latter part of the week in the East. On Wednesday he addressed the Y. M. and Y. W. H. A. Forum in Paterson, N. J.; on Thursday he addressed the Metropolis Club of New York City, and on Friday, the Central Synagogue, of which Rabbi Jonah B. Wise is minister.

Let No One Fail

The cause of Jewish education is the most important one confronting the Jews of America. Cleveland organized the Bureau of Jewish Education four years ago to solve the problem of the ten thousand Jewish boys and girls who are receiving no religious education anywhere.

The Bureau has made steady progress in the face of great difficulties.

It is now subsidizing fifteen Sabbath schools and Hebrew schools, as well as maintaining two training schools for the education of religious and Hebrew school teachers.

The Bureau needs \$90,000 this year to continue and to extend the scope of its work. A campaign to raise this sum of money will begin March 31st. Hundreds of men and women, including all of the teachers of the Temples and Synagogues, have gladly volunteered their services in this campaign. Every member of The Temple, as of the entire community, will be approached. Please do not turn down the appeal which will be made to you for the education of our boys and girls—the next generation of Cleveland Jewry.

Religious School Purim Celebration

The Temple Religious School celebrated the holiday of Purim with one of the most enjoyable festival celebrations that it has ever held. The Elementary School held individual classroom parties and the children were presented with boxes of candy.

In the afternoon, the Junior High School held a very colorful Purim Masque Ball, at which prizes were distributed for the best costumes. The children enjoyed themselves thoroughly. Mahler Hall was beautifully and appropriately decorated.

Much thanks are due Mrs. George W. Furth, Mrs. I. E. Rosenberg, Mrs. Nathan Sloss and their committee of faithful women for the excellent manner in which they arranged and conducted the entire celebration. The celebration was made possible through the courtesy of the Temple Women's Association and the Temple Men's Club.

We shall all meet at the Father-Sons, Mother-Daughters

WHITHER MANKIND?

The Temple Men's Club takes pleasure in announcing
another outstanding symposium for

Wednesday Evening, April 3rd, 8:00 P. M.

Mahler Hall

- Whither Science?** DR. GEORGE W. CRILE,
One of America's foremost surgeons and
scientists.
- Whither Politics?** PROF. A. R. HATTON,
Nationally famous student of politics and
Professor of Political Science at Northwestern
University.
- Whither Business?** MR. ALLARD SMITH,
President of The Cleveland Chamber of Com-
merce.
- Whither Society?** DR. HENRY MILLER BUSCH,
Professor at Western Reserve University.

This will be an even more interesting symposium than
the one on the political campaign which the Men's Club
held at the beginning of the season. Each member of
the Men's Club is privileged to bring a guest.

Temple Monday Evening Lecture Course

presents

DR. MORRIS R. COHEN

Professor of Philosophy at City College of New York and one of the
most brilliant philosophic minds of America.

speaking on

"The Newer Trends in Philosophic Thought"

Monday Evening, April 1st—Single Admission, 35 cents

aters Dinner, Saturday Eve., Cleveland Hotel, 6:30 P. M.

Temple Religious School

Report for the Week

Total enrollment, including the High School—1330.

Number of pupils, Kindergarten to 9th grades, inclusive—1196.

Average attendance for the week—94%.

The following classes had 100% attendance: 1B, Miss Kopperman; 3A,

Miss Markowitz; 3D, Miss Curtis; 3E, Mr. Friedman; 4A, Mrs. Frankel; 4E, 4F, Miss Bernstein; 5A, Mrs. David; 5D, Miss Gimp; 5E, 5F, Mr. Dreyer; 7A, Miss Gimp; 8A, Miss Copenhagen; 9A, Miss Woldman; 9B, Mrs. Reich; 9D, Miss Krause; 9E, 9F, Miss Rubin.

Sunshine Fund

The collection of the Sunshine Fund for the week amounted to \$30.70.

The Temple Wishes to Acknowledge with Thanks the Following Contributions:

To the Floral Fund

Isaac J., David J., Moses J., and Godfrey A. Garson In memory of sister, Millie D. Garson

Mesdames Mort Unger, Jack Grodin, Sam Benjamin, Sam Devay, Ernest Pollock, Max Wertheimer and Archie A. Weiss In memory of Jacob Spiro

Mrs. R. L. Richberger and Mrs. Samuel Newman In memory of brother, Max Hoenig

Mrs. Moses Steifel In memory of son-in-law, Mr. Albert N. Rose of St. Paul

To the Library Fund

Louis and Elizabeth Weitz In honor of birthday of great-grandmother, Mrs. Fannie Grossman

Mrs. Moses Steifel In memory of parents, Mr. and Mrs. Charles Frank

L. L. Sampliner In memory of David W. Sampliner

To the Scholarship Fund

Mrs. B. F. Klein In memory of mother, Mary Newhouse Firth

Mrs. Louis M. Greene In memory of father, Louis Neuman

Mrs. Louis Littman In memory of Mrs. Clara Schaffner

Mrs. Sig. Bamberger, Mrs. I. Rosenwasser and Miss Flora Rohrheimer In memory of Mrs. Clara Schaffner

Mrs. Lena Grossman In memory of Joseph Janowitz

Mrs. Fannie Lowell In memory of Paul Liebenthal

Mrs. Nate Weisenberg, Mrs. A. S. Loventhal In memory of Mrs. Clara Schaffner

G. J. Federman and Alfred A. Benesch In memory of William N. Osterman

Joseph W., Daniel W., and Betty Jane Kornhauser In memory of Edith Weglein

Mrs. Laura Neuman In memory of father, Louis Grossman

In Memoriam

We record with deep sorrow the death of S. B. GOLDBREICH during the past week and extend the condolences of the Congregation to the bereaved family.